Paper: Appendix 1

GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE – A WIN-WIN SOLUTION FOR SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC RECOVERY IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

Green Infrastructure and the quality of the environment are increasingly being identified as key themes within wider economic and social objectives and feature in the new national framework for regeneration **"Transforming Places, Changing Lives"** and Government's strategy for improving quality of place **"World Class Places.**
The time has come for a step change in how the West Midlands views and takes forward Green Infrastructure as key to its economic, social and environmental agendas, supporting sustainable economic recovery now and into the future.

What is Green Infrastructure?

Recent thinking with respect to the ecotowns has helped to develop the concept of Green Infrastructure both in terms of its scope and position in relation to spatial planning and provides a valuable "blue print" for helping to create a vision for what successful Green Infrastructure might look like. The influential ecotowns Green Infrastructure Worksheet contains the following definition :-

'Green infrastructure refers to a strategically planned and managed network of green spaces and other environmental features vital to the sustainability of any urban area.'

In the West Midland the Green Infrastructure Prospectus published in 2006 defines it as 'the network of green spaces and natural elements that intersperse and connect our cities, towns and villages. It is the open spaces, waterways, gardens, woodlands, green corridors, wildlife habitats, street trees, natural heritage and open countryside.' In other words there is something included that everyone can connect with and touches all our lives to a greater or lesser degree.
It is also relevant to economic recovery which the following sections seek to expand upon.

Current Perceptions

The profile of Green Infrastructure has risen markedly in recent years and most organisations and individuals with interest in the land and environment, both urban and rural will have heard of it and take it into account in a range of ways. However, "Green Infrastructure" has many different interpretations, and awareness and views are polarised. To generalise, those organisations (and parts of organisations) with a responsibility for the environment tend to be enthusiasts and both understand and recognise the wide ranging benefits of Green Infrastructure. Those with a mainly economic remit may be aware of Green Infrastructure and recognise some benefits but may not afford a sufficient degree of priority to it in their agendas or may even tend to overlook or disregard its relevance to the regional economy and recovery from recession. Green Infrastructure is not embedded as a priority agenda in the region to the extent it should be and in the current recession we run the risk that hard-line economic views will be entrenched. This could result in the benefits of Green Infrastructure being left further behind, with a resulting diminishment of quality of life for us all, including for economic recovery and development.

This is a generalisation and awareness and understanding is growing across the regional agenda. Progress is developing through the Regional Spatial Strategy work and in emerging core strategies (backed by PPS 12). Nevertheless there is still much more to be done.

The Benefits of Green Infrastructure

The benefits which can be derived from Green Infrastructure extend beyond the environment to social to economic. In many ways it overarches and reaches out to almost everything we do in the region. It crosses boundaries both spatially and in many other ways. Green Infrastructure truly is a multi-functional resource, which underpins sustainability, directly benefits the economy and improves the quality of life of communities.

As we look forward to the region's recovery, the benefits of Green Infrastructure may be summarised as follows under some key headings :

➢ Climate Change

Green Infrastructure can assist with both mitigation of and adaptation to climate change.

- Mitigates the 'urban heat island ' through affording a natural cooling effect, including the provision of shade. Reduces the need for air-conditioning.
- Ameliorates flooding, for example by strategically placed woodland planting in river catchments.
- Reduces the effects of air pollution.

- Provides corridors to allow species migration and consequent adaptation to the effects of climate change.
- Provides biomass which can be used to produce renewable heat and energy.
- Can incorporate sustainable urban drainage, which absorbs excess rainfall and provides an effective and efficient soakaway and a reservoir for water storage.
- Provides a pleasant and practical setting to encourage walking and cycling, thereby helping to reduce CO2 emissions from transport.

➢ A Green Setting for Investment

Well connected, accessible Green Infrastructure can greatly improve 'quality of place' through improving appearance and providing a range of other benefits. There is substantial evidence to show that a good network of parks, gardens, squares, street trees, woodlands and other public spaces substantially boost inward investment. Companies are attracted and in turn employees, customers and services. People want to live and work in such areas and land and property values are raised significantly.
The consequential uplift in quality of life and place cannot fail but to benefit the economy, helping to sustain economic recovery into the future.

➢ Regeneration

Green Infrastructure can be a tool and a framework to assist the physical and economic regeneration of an area. The restoration and creation of appropriate forms of greenspace can transform an area and as above provide a green setting for investment. This can be on a local, eg, small town centre, or landscape scale, eg, the Newlands initiative of major areas of woodland planting on former industrial and derelict land in and around Manchester and Merseyside.

➢ Transport Corridors

Well designed Green Infrastructure along transport corridors can not only enhance the experience and impressions of travellers through improvement of the appearance of the areas through which transport routes pass, but also benefit these places too. This may be through helping to bring together fractured and disrupted land holdings and land use and through providing a green setting for investment.
Green Infrastructure can also provide suitable greenspace to enable and encourage forms of transport such as walking and cycling which are not only enjoyable and CO2 neutral but also provide healthy activity and benefit the local economy.

- **Health, Well-Being and Community Benefits**

Greenspace in both urban and rural settings provides places for people to enjoy, whether this be from physical activity such as play, games, walking and cycling or from quiet activity such as gardening and watching wildlife. Often just the mental satisfaction and peace which being amongst or looking at greenery provides is enough to boost people's well-being.
Substantial evidence has now accumulated to indicate that greenspace not only encourages healthy physical activity but also benefits recovery from illness and mental health, This can be achieved just from being able to look out of a window to trees and other greenery.
Further benefits accrue from encouraging and enabling people to become involved in supporting and managing their local green spaces whether this be from working on allotments, holding community events, improving areas for wildlife, planting trees or looking after community open spaces.
A well designed network of green spaces linking key places in a community, for example homes, schools and shops, helps to build communal spirit and morale and provides safe places for play and people movement.

- **Biodiversity**

Green Infrastructure provides habitats for wildlife and also can link, expand and buffer important habitats and support the migration and dispersal of species.
Creation and enhancement of Green Infrastructure can provide new habitats and link urban and rural areas, improving the value of both town and countryside for wildlife. Greenspace in urban areas can be especially valuable for wildlife and provide a range of habitats in gardens, street trees, copses, parks and ponds.
Green Infrastructure assets include semi-natural habitats, including designated areas of conservation. Protection of such areas is vital, as once lost their re-creation may not be possible.
Green Infrastructure can provide the settings and opportunities to bring people close to wildlife and enhance their enjoyment.

Realising these Benefits for the Future

In say ten to twenty years time (but starting now and building on existing progress) we should aim to have fully recognised the benefits to be derived from embedding Green Infrastructure economically, socially and environmentally in the region and have taken action to arrive at the position set out below :

- GI and its benefits thoroughly understood and accepted by all key organisations and authorities, regionally and locally.
- GI Strategies undertaken and resourced, wherever needed and as a matter of course.

- Strong leadership and championing of GI in the region, with a partnership working to a GI Framework and action plan.
- GI embedded into appropriate strategies and plans, an integral part of Local Development Frameworks, with GI coming about through the planning process.
- Provision made for funding of GI and for its subsequent maintenance.
- All our towns and cities either having or moving towards achieving well planned and connected GI networks, linking effectively with the surrounding countryside. GI planning accepted on an equal footing with other infrastructure planning.
- GI providing a wide range of benefits to communities throughout the region, accessible and well-used.
- GI underpinning regional and local economies.
- Wildlife habitats and populations thriving, an important consequence of an effective GI network.

The Current Position

Currently we have achieved some elements and aspects of the above but still have a long way to go. For instance :

Many of the region's towns and cities currently have good elements of Green Infrastructure. For example Stoke has extensive areas of greenspace although there are questions around connectivity and accessibility. Birmingham has some fine trees and parks, Sutton Park in particular excelling in its size and naturalness. Redditch has a good network of urban woodland, including some important ancient semi-natural woodland amongst newer plantations and wooded road corridors.

The region faces major economic challenges, not least beginning to recover from the current slump and then maintaining that recovery. Green Infrastructure has an important role, both in bringing benefits from existing Green Infrastructure more into play and planning and incorporating an effective Green Infrastructure network into the heart of the regional agenda. The full range and extent of these benefits will not be obtained overnight; rather they can gradually gather momentum, reaching out to all corners of society. Although this will not be a major factor in initial recovery from recession it will help to sustain and strengthen recovery in the longer term and help reduce the likelihood of future recession.

The economic recovery is likely to include major housing growth, as set out in the Regional Spatial Strategy. There are still issues to be resolved regarding this growth over 'how much and where,' and the economic slump has depressed housing starts to a fraction of what the planned growth aspires to. Much of this growth will be focused on the growth points situated at many of the regions major cities/conurbations and shire towns. Green Infrastructure should be

an accepted and vital component of this growth, planned from the outset and forming an integral part of the development. Flowing down from the direction provided in core strategies, no or too little Green Infrastructure in development plans should result in withholding of planning permission.

Green Infrastructure Strategies are essential and must provide a practical vision and framework to guide the development, including necessary arrangements for steering and consultation. Most of the growth points in the West Midlands have strategies in progress.

However, despite many parts of the region having some good existing Green Infrastructure and new Green Infrastructure Strategies taking shape, there are still major issues over the acceptance and priority given to Green Infrastructure, not to mention whether adequate levels and systems of funding for creation and maintenance can be found. Green Infrastructure has yet to be embedded at the heart of planning and development in the region and the fear must be that the recession will cause an entrenchment of the economy and narrowing of priorities for economic recovery as perceived by economic leaders.

This is a pivotal time for the Green Infrastructure agenda in the West Midlands. It is essential that the region grasps the benefits and that it truly becomes a part of sustainable communities and a recognised and understood positive element of economic recovery and future growth.

What Needs to Be Done?

Much has already been achieved and is in progress but more is needed and there is no time to waste if the full extent of potential benefits to the regional economy from Green Infrastructure are to be grasped. This is particularly pertinent in view of the urgent need for economic recovery to start and be maintained. The task is challenging but the prize to be attained should be sufficient to motivate and galvanise appropriate action.

The region has some excellent existing Green Infrastructure to safeguard and enhance and to form the framework upon which further improvement can be made. There are many committed individuals and a partnership of organisations who will share the vision, together with excellent information and guidance. There is also good practice in other regions which we can build on here.

A call to action:

- Regional organisations and Local Authorities with environmental responsibilities must continue and redouble their efforts to embed Green Infrastructure in their and others work. They must co-ordinate their efforts, work more effectively in partnership and make progress both in-house and with external influencing.
- Key organisations and Authorities with economic responsibilities must be prepared to listen, debate and, where necessary, alter

course to encompass Green Infrastructure in their thinking, planning and action.

- Research and planning on the economic value of Green Infrastructure, currently led by the North West, needs to be further developed, mainstreamed and actioned in the West Midlands.
- Green Infrastructure partners should develop a regional Green Infrastructure Framework Plan including an integral Action Plan.
- Green Infrastructure Strategies need to be encouraged and supported. Multi-functionality of Green Infrastructure, including connectivity, must be clearly set out and demonstrated. There needs to be a process of building up and collating consistent map based evidence of the existing resource and strategic priorities across local and sub-regional boundaries.
- The importance and value of having an extensive, appropriate, well-sited, planned and maintained urban tree network, (as part of Green Infrastructure and currently being effectively demonstrated in London by the Trees and Design Action Group), needs to be prioritised and actioned by extending this innovative partnership to the West Midlands.
- Green Infrastructure must be factored into land values and decisions on urban structure, housing densities, etc. This needs to be done at the outset, not part way through the process. Where necessary new funding arrangements and sources must be found and worked out to secure Green Infrastructure assets and provide for long term maintenance and improvement.
- Connection must be made between Green Infrastructure and local communities, improving accessibility, raising awareness, understanding and involvement. Green Infrastructure must enhance local character and quality of place.

Hearts and minds must be courted and won over, so that Green Infrastructure sits as an equal partner with other infrastructure requirements and an integral part of sustainable communities and economic recovery and development in the West Midlands. Confidence and consensus must be built. This needs strong leadership and robust evidence – especially with regard to the significant contribution that Green Infrastructure can make to the economy.

Key References and Links

Transforming Places; Changing Lives: Taking Forward the Regeneration Framework
http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/citiesandregions/transformingplacesframework

World class places: The Government's strategy for improving quality of place
http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/worldclassplaces

Green Infrastructure Planning Guide – Appendix B Datasets used
http://www.greeninfrastructure.eu/?page=86

The Economic Value of Green Infrastructure
www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/nweeconomicvalueofgi.pdf/$FILE/nweeconomicvalueofgi.pdf

Public space at CABE
http://www.cabe.org.uk/public-space

Eco Towns Green Infrastructure Worksheet
http://www.tcpa.org.uk/pages/green-infrastructure.html

Green Infrastructure Prospectus in the West Midlands
http://www.growingourfuture.org/wmwff/taskgroups/gip/plan_pros.htm

FC Press Release 12323 - Forestry Commission launches partnership for greener towns and cities
http://www.forestry.gov.uk/newsrele.nsf/WebPressReleases/C9A6CF311A15D20C8025757E0036B24E