



for birds
for people
for ever



HEALTHY, WEALTHY AND WISE

Sustainable communities:
creating the right environment



CREATING THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT

We as a society have a once in a generation opportunity to build sustainable communities. We must make the right choices to provide the homes and jobs that people need without jeopardising their quality of life, now and in the future.

Getting it right means creating the right environment. A healthy natural environment offers many benefits. It provides socially inclusive places, reduces crime, encourages businesses to invest in an area and reduces national health service costs, as well as helping wildlife. This is about much more than tackling litter, graffiti and dog mess.

To create a healthy environment, we must face up to some serious challenges to reverse wildlife declines, fight climate change and save precious water resources. The RSPB believes that protecting and enhancing the environment is a healthy, wealthy and wise choice. This booklet outlines the advantages of a sustainable approach and some of the challenges that need to be overcome to achieve this.

'We must raise the quality of how we build and what we build, protecting and enhancing the countryside and green spaces for all to enjoy.'

John Prescott MP, Deputy Prime Minister
Sustainable Communities: building for the future. 2003.
Office of the Deputy Prime Minister



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



Giving our children safe, accessible and natural places to go will nurture curiosity, confidence and an appreciation for the world around them.

HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

Having access to safe, natural green space increases levels of physical activity.

Bird song outside your window, walking through bluebell woods, catching a glimpse of a kingfisher, frost on a spider's web, the scent of a pine cone – just makes you feel good to be alive!

Having access to natural places near to your home is key to better health. Research commissioned by the RSPB entitled *Natural fit*¹ found that:

- in comparison to other forms of exercise, walking in green space, gardening and doing conservation work sustain people's interest for longer. Nature is the motivational factor and exercise becomes secondary to the sheer enjoyment of being outside in the natural environment
- a study from Holland found that living near green space resulted in fewer health complaints and better mental and physical health
- looking at nature through a hospital window can lead to improved recovery and lower requirement for pain relief following operations
- children increase their physical activity levels when they are outdoors and they are attracted to nature. Contact with nature also improves attention and behaviour among children
- restoring wildlife habitats can help us restore ourselves. It lifts our spirits and reduces stress
- communities are strengthened by taking part in nature activities. It increases a sense of community pride and builds links between individuals

Creating wildlife-rich places throughout sustainable communities will help deliver these benefits.

Contact with nature is good for us, and enhances our quality of life as a whole: objective research is confirming what many intuitively know.

Working with the grain of nature: A biodiversity strategy for England. (2002) defra.

¹ Bird W (2004) *Natural fit – can greenspace and biodiversity increase levels of physical activity?* The RSPB.



David Levenson (rspb-images.com)



The Photo Library Wales (Alamy.com)

A high quality environment attracts businesses to an area.

WEALTHY COMMUNITIES



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



David Levenson (rspb-images.com)

There is a burgeoning economy linked to the environment. It includes tourism, environmental technologies such as waste management, environmental consultancies, rural crafts, organic farming and habitat management.

- The environmental economy contributed more than £7.8 billion gross value added to the south-east economy in 2000, which was equivalent to just over 6% of the total regional economy¹.
- In the West Midlands, 91,000 people work in jobs related to the environment compared with 34,000 in telecommunications. The environment sector in the region could double in size by 2010².
- Tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of the world economy. The attractiveness of a destination is closely linked with local distinctiveness in the form of wildlife and natural features. A study of the Norfolk coast estimated that visitors to six sites where the quality of the natural environment is an attraction

spent £21 million per year locally. Those wanting to see birds and wildlife spent £6 million in the area, supporting an estimated 135 jobs³.

Investing in our natural environment saves public money.

- The cost of physical inactivity to the economy (including to the National Health Service) is calculated to be £8.2 billion a year. The potential value of a park in an urban area, in terms of avoided inactivity, is estimated at between £0.8 million and £2.7 million per year to the national economy, including £0.2 million to £0.6 million to the NHS (saving dependent on population density)⁴.

We do not need to choose between a strong economy and a high quality environment – both are possible.

¹ *The Environmental Economy of the South East: Final Report.* (2002) Prepared by Land Use Consultants, SGW Ltd and Cambridge Econometrics.

² *The Environmental Economy of the West Midlands.* (2000) Advantage West Midlands and Environment Agency.

³ Rayment M and Dickie I (2001) *Conservation Works for local economies in the UK.* The RSPB.

⁴ Bird W (2004) *Natural fit – can greenspace and biodiversity increase levels of physical activity?* The RSPB.

Visitors spend their money in the local economy. 2.85 million adults aged over 15 in the UK go birdwatching regularly or occasionally Target Group Index, BMRB International 2004

WISE COMMUNITIES

We depend on our environment for food, water and places to live so we have to work with nature, rather than against it if we are to maintain the ecological services on which we depend.

- Restoring river floodplain wetlands alleviates urban flooding. Managing flooding sustainably is likely to be an increasingly important issue as the impacts of climate change are felt.
- Vegetation provides shade in summer, and can reduce the wind in streets and wind loads on buildings. This could potentially reduce heating requirements by up to 25%⁵.

Enhancing the environment in new communities could help us to achieve the European target to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010⁶.

The natural environment will provide many solutions to the challenges and threats we face if we keep it healthy in future development.



Redshank by Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

⁵ *Biodiversity by Design: A guide for sustainable communities*. (2004) TCPA.

⁶ www.countdown2010.net

⁷ National Rivers Authority. *A guide to the understanding and management of saltmarshes*. (1995) R&D Note 324. NRA, Bristol.

At the coast, the RSPB has trialled creating saltmarshes by letting the sea breach coastal defences in a controlled way. This can help to maintain the integrity of sea defences as it reduces wave energy, and thereby the destructive power of the sea. The Environment Agency estimates that engineered coastal defence costs may be £5,000 per metre. A saltmarsh provides a natural buffering effect and can reduce coastal defence costs to about £400 per metre – a massive 92% saving to the public purse⁷

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Sustainable communities need **wise** planning and to do this we must meet the following four challenges, set out in the next few pages:



Ernie Lanes (rspb-images.com)

1 Deliver green infrastructure



Justin Kase (Alamy)

2 Respect environmental capacity



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

3 Conserve natural resources



Tony Hamblin (rspb-images.com)

4 Protect and enhance our wildlife

CHALLENGE 1 DELIVER GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

Parks, allotments, woodland, nature reserves, disused railways, public and private gardens and playing fields are all part of our green infrastructure.

Green spaces around us contribute to a healthy and pleasant environment. They can offer places to relax or be active, spaces for people to get together and they can also encourage businesses into an area. A mosaic of green infrastructure in terms of shape, type, size and use delivers the most benefits to people, as well as helping wildlife.

The RSPB believes that green infrastructure is essential to the development of sustainable communities. It is as vital to us as any traditional infrastructure such as roads, schools and hospitals.



‘There is very little point in harking back to landscapes lost, however fond the memories might be. This is a new millennium – a time for taking positive steps to make amends. Although we may have lost much of the nation’s wildlife in the past half century, the good news is that we CAN bring it back’

Chris Baines – independent environment adviser, writer and broadcaster

CASE STUDY

A strategic approach to providing green infrastructure

In the Milton Keynes and South Midlands growth area, a partnership of government agencies, local authorities and environmental groups has developed a set of principles for green infrastructure. For instance, green infrastructure should provide a focus for social inclusion,

community development and life long learning. It should also maintain and enhance biodiversity to ensure that green infrastructure results in a net gain of Biodiversity Action Plan habitats. *Planning Sustainable Communities – A Green Infrastructure Guide for Milton Keynes and South Midlands* is available from www.countryside.gov.uk and www.environment-agency.gov.uk



CHALLENGE 2 RESPECT ENVIRONMENTAL CAPACITY

Holt Studios International Ltd (Alamy)



Even if green infrastructure is fully designed into new communities, there are still serious questions about the environmental impact of development. An important principle of sustainable development is to recognise the limits of the environment to accept further development without irreversible damage⁸.

Nationally, decisions have been taken with only a limited understanding of environmental impacts, or the environmental capacity of particular regions to accommodate additional development. For example, much development is planned for the south-east of England, which has many areas valued for their beautiful

landscapes and rich wildlife. It is also the driest part of the country, and is predicted to get drier due to climate change.

The RSPB believes that much more must be done to assess and avoid impacts at national and regional levels. To do this, we need a national spatial strategy, subject to a robust strategic environmental assessment.

At the local level, decisions about the location of development should also be informed by a full understanding of local environmental capacity. Sensitive areas should be avoided. If this is not possible, effective mitigation should be put in place by planners and developers, or compensation provided as a last resort.

⁸ *Planning Policy Statement 1 Delivering Sustainable Development*. (2005) ODPM.

CASE STUDY 1

Growth in the east of England

The draft regional spatial strategy for the east of England proposes 23,900 new homes each year, a 15% increase on the previous planned rate. The appraisal report on the strategy warns that 'the scale and pace of growth envisioned is likely to be highly environmentally damaging'¹⁰ unless significant measures are taken to mitigate the impacts.

¹⁰ *Regional Spatial Strategy for the East of England. Report of the Sustainability Appraisal*. 2004, Levett-Therivel and Land Use Consultants.

CASE STUDY 2

Water demand in Kent

In the Ashford growth area, more than 13,000 new homes are proposed over 15 years. Increased water demand may have to be met in part by new, or expanded, reservoirs and increased abstraction from the chalk aquifer. There will also be more waste water and urban run-off to deal with. All this is likely to have an adverse effect on the quantity and quality of water in local rivers, which also support wildlife-rich wetlands such as Stodmarsh National nature reserve.



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

CHALLENGE 3 CONSERVE NATURAL RESOURCES

Proposals to increase house building in the UK, particularly in south-east England, potentially have massive implications for the consumption of natural resources. Fossil fuel consumption, to provide energy for houses and fuel for transport, generates pollution and greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change. More houses also means more demands on water resources.

An analysis of the costs and benefits of building all new homes to the Building Research Establishment's EcoHomes excellent standard¹⁰ has been undertaken using reports from defra, UK Water Industry Research and the Housing Corporation. It is estimated that to build a home to the EcoHomes excellent standard,

in terms of water and energy saving actions, the additional cost is as little as £160 per home – a small amount in the overall build cost of a new house. These measures also continue to provide monetary and natural resource savings during the life of the home.

The EcoHomes excellent standard could save 10,000 megalitres of water per year, implying savings of £1.6 billion on new water resources infrastructure, and 10 million tonnes of carbon emissions per year, potentially worth £2.9 billion over the next 30 years¹¹.

The costs of building to the EcoHomes excellent standard are clearly worthwhile for society and would help keep new development within environmental limits.



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



The above map shows actual distribution of nightingales.

The above map shows the predicted 2050 high scenario.

CASE STUDY 1

Climate change and wildlife:

The area of the UK with suitable climate for nightingales is predicted to reduce significantly by 2050, particularly in the south-east of England, as a result of climate change¹².

Communities need to be designed to minimise the need for travel and to encourage a shift from using cars to other forms of transport that generate less pollution, such as cycling, walking, trains and buses.

¹⁰ The EcoHomes standard is defined by the Building Research Establishment and is widely recognised by housebuilders.

¹¹ Dickie I (2005) *Resource savings and EcoHomes* RSPB Discussion paper.

¹² Harrison P A, Berry P M, and Dawson, T P (eds). *Climate Change and Nature Conservation in Britain and Ireland: Modelling natural resource responses to climate change (the MONARCH project)*. UKCIP Technical Report, Oxford.

CHALLENGE 4 PROTECT AND ENHANCE WILDLIFE

We have wonderful habitats and wildlife in and around the proposed growth areas, such as the wild marshes of North Kent, where around 200,000 wild birds spend the winter. They are protected by the strongest international conservation laws. Carefully planned development reduces the risk that these special areas and the surrounding countryside will be damaged.

However, potential adverse impacts from transport projects, such as a Lower Thames Crossing in the Thames Gateway or the M6 Expressway in the Midlands are still a major threat. More people

in new housing developments near sensitive wildlife sites also need to be carefully managed to avoid indirect impacts from more intensive recreational pressure, such as in the Nene Valley, Northamptonshire, part of the Milton Keynes and South Midlands growth area.

Sustainable communities should protect and enhance wildlife. Improvements can be achieved by creating habitats at every scale from regional parks to installing green roofs and erecting nestboxes. All work should complement and help achieve the UK's Biodiversity Action Plan targets.



Wigeons by David Klaer (rspb-images.com)



Dartford Warbler by Mike McKavett (rspb-images.com)

CASE STUDY 1

The Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area is mostly contained within the Blackwater Valley, an area of housing growth west of London. The area has been designated as internationally important for birds such as the nightjar and Dartford warbler.

The heathland is being overused as there is a lack of alternative accessible high quality open space in the area. This is resulting in damage to the birds and their habitat. This is an unnecessary conflict between people and wildlife.

CASE STUDY 2

RSPB Salthome nature reserve, in the heart of Teeside, is set against a landscape of the declining steel and petro-chemical industries that once employed many people in the area. As part of a programme to regenerate this region, Salthome is being transformed from 380 hectares of mostly brownfield and derelict land into accessible and welcoming greenspace, with community facilities and an international conservation importance that the people of Teeside can rightly be proud of.

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES AND THE RSPB

The RSPB believes that making sure the environment is protected and enhanced when developing sustainable communities is the healthy, wealthy and wise choice. It is the only one we can afford to make. This is why we are involved in the shaping of sustainable communities – both on the ground where development will happen and at a policy-making level.

We are working with the government, regional bodies, local authorities, statutory agencies, the development industry, professional bodies, environmental groups and the public.



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

RAINHAM MARSHES – LEADING THE WAY



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

The RSPB is working throughout the Thames Gateway growth area to bring the benefits of wildlife-rich spaces to urban communities. The RSPB's Rainham, Wennington and Aveley Marshes nature reserve is to receive almost £1 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and £3.25 million from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's Sustainable Communities Fund. The money will be used to build a specially designed Environment and Education Centre in Purfleet, which will become a gateway to the reserve. The centre will be a flagship of eco-design for the Thames Gateway and will be of very high energy and water efficiency standards. Newly-created discovery zones will provide exciting opportunities for people to learn about the wildlife that lives on the Marshes as well as improve understanding of the history of the site.

'We are thrilled to help open up Rainham Marshes for everyone to explore and learn about. Heritage gems like this are going to be a huge asset to the regeneration of Thurrock and the Thames Gateway by giving communities the roots that connect the past to the present.

They will help to generate local pride and give a sense of place and identity that will be essential as new communities grow within the Gateway over the coming decade'.

Robyn Greenblatt, Regional Manager for the Heritage Lottery Fund in the East of England.



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The RSPB is the UK charity working to secure a healthy environment for birds and wildlife, helping create a better world for us all. We belong to BirdLife International, the global partnership of bird conservation organisations.

Cover photograph: Corbis