

Sustainable Communities Conference 3rd September 2004

REGENERATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

John Markland, SNH Chairman

Thank you for inviting me to speak to this conference.

SNH is often characterised as an organisation for rural Scotland, indeed for the middle classes (as one radio presenter put it to me). Neither of these contentious is true and this is a good opportunity to talk briefly on how we are making a contribution to regeneration in Scotland, tempting though it was to talk about building procurement in Inverness.

In both rural and urban areas sense of place and quality of life are closely linked to the quality of the local environment. And the right to a healthy environment is a cornerstone of environmental justice. In this presentation I will suggest that the environment should be alongside social and economic interests in the regeneration agenda – in effect, of course, this is about sustainable development. To do this I will briefly describe the work which SNH is involved in around Scotland to increase people's access to greenspace, and the links between that and environmental justice. I will illustrate this by reference to 2 programmes.

- our Greenspace for Communities initiative which was launched in 2002 and in which we work alongside local authorities and many other partners; and,
- the Fresh Futures programme, working in partnership with Forward Scotland to target lottery funding from the New Opportunities Fund to improve local environments.

First I had better say what I mean by green space, and how it links to environmental justice.

Green space

What is green or open space?

Put simply, Green space is the space which is not taken up with buildings – it might be paved (as for streets and civic squares) or under vegetation (roadside verges, parks, woodlands, sports pitches, cemeteries, river embankments, hospital grounds, gardens, or allotments).

The social, economic and environmental benefits of green space are extensive and varied. But these are not new. Victorian legislation promoted urban parks for their health-giving, their attractiveness, and the way they improved state of mind ... and so on - most of the benefits have been recognised for a long time and were the basis of the major investment in city parks in the second half of the 19th Century.

Barriers and exclusion

I want to turn briefly to the barriers to people making use of greenspace and deriving these benefits. The top three feature in almost all public polls on environmental issues in civic space, they are:

- dog fouling [vast improvement]
- litter [largely static without high investment – Manchester]
- vandalism

These, if you like, are barriers of abhorrence - they make a place a nasty place to be.

Then there is fear, which can be caused by

- alcohol or drug abuse
- threatening behaviour (young male groups)
- vulnerability (young children, lone females)
- racial/ religious antagonism
- crime
- dark

Then there is a barrier from having unattractive, boring green spaces. If you think away from public parks and similar managed greenspace to the more natural green spaces which often surround our towns, then you might add

- uncertainty over access rights (the new access legislation is an important driver in allowing people to feel assured they have a right to be in the countryside)
- user inexperience
- physical barriers/ lack of safety

These barriers - abhorrence, fear, inexperience - are all exclusion issues in that they stop some people from using green space. They relate very closely to social and economic circumstances. High unemployment can link to alcohol or drug abuse, or increased crime, or simply congregation of male adults in parks. Poverty links to high social housing costs and poor business rate incomes, and hence local authorities with limited budgets to maintain or supervise green space. Lack of civic pride is a vicious circle; vandalism is not discouraged, the community is apathetic about demanding improvement, and badly kept business premises breed litter and fly-tipping in public spaces.

But beyond these barriers, green space is intrinsically a very socially inclusive commodity. It does not require a car (provided it is nearby). It does not require a ticket. And it does not require a lot of organisation. Potentially, green space within a town is a service which provides wide-ranging benefits which can be enjoyed by all.

So there are four messages which we take from all this:

- adequate, well managed green space is a basic requirement for a modern town. It is not an optional extra.

- it provides for social interaction, health benefits, recreation opportunities, biodiversity, an attractive environment, and encourages investment and business
- disadvantaged areas lead to barriers to use and that in turn leads to environmental injustice
- sustainable settlements have good green space

So that is the context for SNH's work on greenspace – and I'm sure you'll already recognise many of the central themes of the regeneration agenda.

Greenspace for Communities [Julie Proctor, Greenspace Scotland]

So may I turn to some of our experience, starting with one of the early Countryside Around Towns projects in the urban fringe between Hamilton Motherwell and Glasgow. One of our early actions was to plant some trees in a bit of community greenspace, by way of making the waste grassland more attractive and diverse. Eighteen months later we paid for these trees to be uplifted, after we had found out that the community did not agree that trees were nice there. So there was a very simple but important early lesson in community engagement - it has to be effective, and the outcome of any findings respected.

The Countryside around Towns projects did extremely valuable work during the late 1980s and 1990s, but they were never conceived or resourced on anything like the scale needed to deliver real improvements to green space across our cities and towns. The Greenspace for Communities initiative aims to do that, to transform the environment and quality of life in and around our settlements. Its mission is:

To promote sustainability, improve quality of life and enhance the competitiveness of urban Scotland by:

- creating new green spaces and improving the management of existing ones
- extending opportunities for people to enjoy countryside in and around towns
- making Scotland's settlements more attractive places

We have placed a very strong emphasis on partnership: between the public sector (mainly local authorities and SNH), local communities, the voluntary sector, and business interests. We have placed as much emphasis on helping communities to instigate and take forward green space projects, as on actually undertaking projects directly through the initiative.

We have set up a new, national organisation, Greenspace Scotland, with a remit to build support for action on greenspace, to win new resources for it, to support and help consolidate local greenspace partnerships, and to help new ones establish. Already Greenspace Scotland has attracted additional funding of £400,000 from the Scottish Executive for a suite of new greenspace projects.

The Greenspace Forum exists to bring together and share good practice among local authority, community, business and voluntary sector organisations involved in greenspace.

Fresh Futures

Let me turn now to the Fresh Futures programme, in which SNH and Forward Scotland are working together to deliver the New Opportunity Fund's environmental programmes in Scotland. The first programme 'Green Space and Sustainable Communities' made available £1m of grant to over 50 communities, to improve access to green space or to help communities to take action to improve their sustainability. The second programme 'Transforming your Space' was launched in February last year. A total of £4.5m is available to help communities improve their local environment. Demand for this grant has been intense; so far bids for over £25m have been received, which demonstrates the latent community demand for this. We have already offered some £3m. This is a measure of the interest and determination of many communities in upgrading their local environment.

Let me tell you about some of the experience we have gained through Fresh Futures lottery grant programmes.

- Our expectations have been vastly exceeded in terms of the scale of project which community organisations are proposing and are capable of managing, and of the partnership funding which they are able to attract. We started off thinking that community groups would only apply for relatively small grants for small projects, while any larger projects would be brought forward by local authorities or other larger agencies. In fact community organisations seem to be developing and managing projects valued at several hundred thousand pounds, with a wide range of match funding sources and associated reporting requirements.
- We have five themes in our programme – improving local environments, public green and open space, local access, community gardens, and sustainable community assets. By the far the largest number of applications are for community green space improvements – developing disused or poorly managed areas of green space into areas which will be used by local people – by children for play or sport, by schools for education, by elderly people for meeting. The demand is huge, and there is a common theme - helping to provide the basics of what people want out of their local green space.
- For Transforming your Space, we have explicitly said we will allocate around 75% of funding to areas of recognised disadvantage. That sounds straightforward, and we are making use of the Executive's indicators of deprivation report published last year to track how well we are targeting our grants. But there is an outstanding gap, which the authors recognise - there is no indicator of *environmental* disadvantage. In the Executive's Community Regeneration Policy, they too identify that among the available indicators of the quality of life in any neighbourhood, there are none which

encapsulate environmental quality. This is an important gap, because in funding environmental improvements, we would like to have an indicator of the present quality of the environment, and if it is degraded, just how does it compare with problem areas elsewhere.

This is a problem some way off resolution. Together with Greenspace Scotland, SNH has undertaken a research project on the links between green space and the quality of life – which will review all the benefits of greenspace, and the data sources which may help in quantifying such benefits. That may help, but we also need information on the extent and accessibility of urban green space. Modern computer analysis of aerial photographs can help, and we have done a pilot study in Glasgow which provides information on extent. And the Executive's PAN on Open Space has encouraged local authorities to undertake audits of Open Space, and SNH is making some funding available to contribute towards such audits. But none of these are short term solutions.

My own view is that we must have information on environmental quality at a neighbourhood level which can be used by public agencies to target resources towards areas where there is environmental injustice. And we must have that within the next 3 years.

To conclude

In this presentation I have echoed many of the key themes from other contributors today. Furthermore, the case for putting the environment alongside social and economic interests at the centre of the regeneration agenda has been made forcefully through a number of reports and publications from prestigious bodies over the last 2 years or more. It is heartening to be in such company. But clearly it is not enough – what we need is action to put the environment at the centre of the regeneration agenda.

The Executive's £104m Community Regeneration Fund is of course a welcome announcement. A critical opportunity to put the environment firmly in this work lies in the targets associated with that fund which will be announced this Autumn.