

# Main Issues Report 2013

## Green Networks Position Paper

### 1. What are “green networks”

- 1.1 The draft Scottish Planning Policy document defines green networks as “connected areas of green infrastructure and open space that together form an integrated and multi-functional network”. SNH define green networks as “a broad term which usually refers to a set of connected areas of green space and habitats such as parks, paths and woodlands within an urban or suburban region which provide a range of social, ecological and economic benefits such as increasing the quality of life within an area, and creating sustainable communities”.
- 1.2 These definitions can lead to confusion about what green networks are referring to in the context of the development plan. For some readers they are the wildlife corridors between settlements, for others it is a stricter definition of “green infrastructure”, dealing with the impacts of the development on the wider environment, including the provision of Sustainable Urban Drainage systems, or even bird boxes on new development.
- 1.3 We believe that for Aberdeenshire green networks include both of these elements and all parts in between. Strategic corridors around and through settlements, or between settlements can as easily be part of a green network as the spaces around individual buildings. It is also important to recognise that the “green network” is a mosaic of uses and functions, and despite the assertion by SNH that they should be “connected areas” they do not necessarily have to be joined together. In the context of rural Aberdeenshire agricultural field margins may be the only means by which a true “connected” system could be identified. Draft SPP confirms that they are ‘green’ and ‘blue’ (water environment) features of the natural and built environments that can provide benefits without being connected.” (Green features include parks, grasslands, buffer strips, woodlands, trees, play spaces, allotments, community growing spaces, playing fields, swales, hedges, verges and gardens. Blue features can include rivers, lochs, wetlands, canals, other water courses, ponds, coastal and marine areas including beaches, and sustainable urban drainage systems.)
- 1.4 In line with the “multifunctional” nature of green networks we also think that green networks can exist, even when the green or blue element is not the main function of the land use. Thus a footpath link may be made of black tarmac, but can make a contribution to the green network both because it promotes a sustainable “green” transport mode, and provides opportunity for biodiversity on its verges. Both definitions of “green”; as a colour or as a principle can be applied.

### 2. National and Regional Context

- 2.1 Green networks and green infrastructure are high on the national planning agenda, with draft NPF3 identifying the need for expanded green networks in and around towns and cities. The National Planning Framework states the need for high quality and multi functional green networks, specifically in terms of making areas accessible for people, and providing multiple benefits.
- 2.2 Draft SPP (2013) requires the planning system to “protect and enhance green infrastructure, including open space and green networks, to provide multiple benefits;” “prevent fragmentation” and “promote easy and safe access to green infrastructure”.

- 2.3 The Proposed Strategic Development Plan does not provide a definition of green networks, but identifies the need for Local Development Plans to take account of green networks in identifying land for development. Specifically, the SDP requires the LDP to:
- Improve and enhance existing strategic walking and cycling networks in a way which creates opportunities for improvements to the natural environment by linking habitats and species in green networks.
  - Increase tree cover (and its role in the wider green network)
  - Create accessible green networks in major settlements in order to achieve a high quality environment.

Therefore, green networks have a number of roles; contributing to amenity, nature conservation, biodiversity, physical activity, climate change and improved quality of places.

### **3. Benefits of identifying green networks within the development plan**

3.1 The identification of green networks may bring many benefits:

- They act as setting for economic growth and investment, improving regional image and a local sense of place make place.
- They promote conservation of local landscape character and provide a means of presenting local distinctiveness.
- They provide habitats and wildlife corridors to sustain biodiversity, and are an explicit opportunity to help meet our obligations under Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004.
- They can contribute to “functional networks” of other features that support species but are not necessarily connected. i.e. for birds this would include nesting sites, feeding grounds, roosting sites etc.
- They contribute to the maintenance of ecological systems necessary to sustain life.
- They provide opportunities for physical activity and access to the outdoors, and increase accessibility on foot or cycle within settlements, to the surrounding countryside and between rural communities and to contribute to the health and well being.
- They can contribute towards alleviating climate change in relation to SuDs and minimising flood risk.

The SNH Publication “Green Networks in Development Planning” 2012 provides more detailed exploration of the benefits of green networks.

3.2 Green networks thus have a variety of roles with significant benefits for people, business and nature. They add value to our communities and make a significant contribution to the amenity and sense place associated with them. They provide a material benefit to planning for wildlife, through the increased attractiveness of our towns and villages through the “green network” infrastructure. Linking green network creation to development proposals provides a way to pay for these benefits.

### **4. Green networks and the development plan**

4.1 A variety of approaches to green networks are being promoted by planning authorities across Scotland. In the Central Belt the Central Scotland Green Network provides a focus for work on delivering green networks, with emphasis on the identification of specific projects to improve and enhance the green network. Throughout this area the existence

and concept of the “green network” is accepted and it features prominently in discussion on place making and design. Edinburgh Council identifies the wide ranging nature of actions that can impact on the green network.

- 4.2 Some authorities have mapped “green space networks” and are promoting these in the context of green networks. Aberdeen City have identified a strategic network of woodland, and other habitat, active travel and recreation routes, greenspace links, watercourses and waterways. In addition Aberdeen City places a responsibility on developers to determine the location and extent of green networks, and requires mitigation from any development which impacts on wildlife habitat, open space or connections between these. Fife Council gives a commitment to map green networks across the main settlements, composed of strategic open space elements including for example larger parks, etc, core paths, water courses, woodlands, habitat networks and key streets with tree avenues. Substantial work has been undertaken with communities to identify the extent of the green network. Highland Council also takes this approach and over time Green Networks will be identified right across Highland but with a focus around the regional centres and sub-regional centres (through SG). Each green network will have a specific set of deliverable projects that will have a benefit to the local area, and all will be underpinned by the set of green network principles. The LDP includes a policy which prevents fragmentation of green networks.
- 4.3 Finally an alternative approach is provided by Dumfries and Galloway Council who have adopted a policy based approach: “Green Networks should be protected and enhanced. Proposals for development in areas which form part of this network should seek to avoid fragmentation of a network and/or improve connectivity, where appropriate. Proposals that add to and/or enhance green networks or connections to them will be supported.”
- 4.4 From this brief discussion the three basic approaches can be identified of: mapping green networks for specific protection; providing a specific policy protection to features impacted upon by development that can be considered as part of the green network; or providing strategic reference to the importance of green networks over a range of policy topics.
- 4.5 SNH have set out in advice the process that they believe should be followed for the inclusion of green network policy within Local Development Plans (Green Networks in Development Plans 2012). As a first step they suggest that an evidence base is established to identifying key green network components alongside other plan information. Mapping of networks within individual settlements would be difficult but access to the habitat survey data was collected as part of the open space audit conducted in 2008. There are also useful data sets available from the Forestry Commission on semi-natural woodland which is based on recent survey While this approach could have huge logistical challenges in a rural area such as Aberdeenshire, and could take years to complete, it would not be impossible.
- 4.6 Mapping of “green networks” based on ecological survey and known information regarding access and public use is appropriate in small scale areas, such as Aberdeen City but is not likely to be appropriate for extensive areas such as Aberdeenshire. Such a task would be of considerable size and is unlikely to provide meaningful information in the great number of spaces between settlements where land use change is unlikely to be regulated by the planning system. This has been recognised by Highland Council who propose only to focus around the regional centres and sub-regional centres. Such an approach does not fully exploit the multi-functional nature of the green network, as it is based on existing knowledge and uses.
- 4.6 The adoption of a purely policy approach to promoting green networks is likewise inappropriate as it provides little real guidance to what outcomes the development industry is expected to deliver within green networks, and it becomes a policy of protection rather than development.
- 4.7 A wide ranging approach to green networks that recognises both their importance in a range of policy topics, from access, provision of open space, biodiversity and design, and the protection of specific features, seems to be an appropriate route to take. This is similar to the approach demonstrated by the Edinburgh Local Development Plan. Due to the very

diverse nature of green network issues it seems inappropriate to try and encompass all the issues in a single policy or policy approach when fundamentally the objectives behind protection, enhancement and creation of green networks remain very varied.

## 5. What the development plan already does to support green networks / green infrastructure

5.1 Due to the multi-faceted nature of green networks, many of the principles which the term is now being used to encompass are already considered within the development plan. Issues associated with open space requirements, access and accessibility and wildlife “corridors” have been part of the planners’ tool kit for many decades. The following table details the contribution of the current Local Development Plan to the creation and sustenance of green networks.

**Table 1 Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan 2012 and Green networks**

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| SG STRLtype1:<br>Development in the Coastal Zone                               | Protects the special nature of the coastal area, it only allows development which requires a coastal location.   |
| SG STRLtype2:<br>Greenbelt   | Restricts development in the greenbelt to extensions, conversions, development associated with forestry, agriculture or horticulture, or essential development.  |
| SG LSD1:<br>Masterplanning   | The advice on masterplans highlights the requirement to consider; connectivity (maximise existing opportunities such as woodland , watercourse buffer strips), the early design of SuDs; existing natural features and any potential enhancement; open space (early design, connectivity); multifunctional green space   |
| SG LSD5: Public Open Space   | Requires development to provide new public open spaces in line with the Parks and Open Space Strategy 2011<br><br>Protects all areas of protected land or open space unless it is for development ancillary to the use of the site as open space or is for an essential community facility.  |
| SG LSD6: Public Access   | Ensure existing and potential public access routes are protected and that new developments incorporate opportunities for walking and cycling.  |
| SG Developer Contributions3: Water and waste water drainage infrastructure     | Requires development to implement a sustainable drainage system (SuDS)   |
| SG Natural Environment2: Protection of the wider biodiversity and geodiversity | Requires the developer to ‘identify measures that will be taken to enhance biodiversity and geodiversity in proportion to the potential opportunities available and the scale of the development in line with good practice (this should include habitat creation and management, and the restoration of habitats and wildlife networks, where possible, incorporating existing habitats)’ |
| SG Historic Environment3: Historic Gardens and designed landscapes             | Protects gardens from inappropriate development.   |
| SG Safeguarding1: Protection and conservation of the water environment         | Protects water quality and includes a requirement to provide buffer strips adjacent to water courses.  |

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| SG Safeguarding3:<br>Protection and<br>conservation of trees<br>and woodland | Secures protection of trees and woodland to retain green networks of woodland, which support a variety of species, and to avoid the loss of connectivity between different woodland habitats. |
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- 5.2 The plan protects most areas of open space within settlements, but not exclusively. There are some areas which are not specifically protected, generally where they are too small to warrant a designation.
- 5.3 It is significant that the plan requires the provision of 40% of a site area to be set aside as “public open space”, and that the Parks and Open Space Strategy places natural and semi natural green spaces at the top of the open space hierarchy. While equipped play areas, sports pitches and formal parks all have a place within the hierarchy, and are governed by threshold standards as to when they should be provided it identifies that neighbourhood greenspace, blue-green corridors, and community woodlands are appropriate for all development sizes. Community food growing (allotments etc.) is encouraged for any development of more than 50 houses.
- 5.4 Monitoring of the plan has noted that some of the elements noted above are not being widely implemented. In particular some parts of the development industry has firmly held objections to the imposition of a 40% open space requirement, despite this being confirmed by the Local Development Plan examination and sites being allocated of a sufficient size to accommodate the open space needs. Likewise the requirement to actively provide for biodiversity promoted by SG natural environment 2 is not widely carried out.
- 5.5 This suggests that there is a problem with the policy as it is currently expressed within the LDP2012 that requires to be addressed if the emphasis on green networks is to be promoted in the next plan.

## **6. What additional things the development plan could do to promote green networks**

- 6.1 As shown above, the plan already does a lot to promote green networks, however, there is little in the plan to promote the connection of green infrastructure to create the green network framework. A variety of approaches could be adopted, as noted in section 4 above.
- 6.2 The wide ranging approach identified in that section would tend to suggest that a “green network” policy is unlikely to deliver the multi-faceted outcomes required. Instead a process of re-emphasis of the contribution of existing plan policies to the creation of green networks should be undertaken, with an explicit statement of the need to bring all these elements together to create green networks set as an objective of the plan.
- 6.3 This would require a statement in the proposed plan settlement statements to explore the opportunities for the creation of green networks and identification of additional protected land that contributes to this objective specifically for the purposes of supporting the “green network”. Identification of a “strategic” Aberdeenshire wide green network is of very limited value, and would seem to be straying into the realms of agricultural and forestry policy regulation, over which the development plan has no control. This may be a function for the Regional Landuse Strategy Pilot project currently underway in Aberdeenshire.
- 6.4 Changes to the supporting text of the relevant policies of the plan could be made to highlight and encourage the contribution that implementation could make to the creation of the local green network. Specifically, the open space policy could encourage greater consideration of the creation of networks. The masterplanning policy could require the linking up of Suds, woodland, open space, design, paths, etc. While the Technical Advice Note to SG LSD2 highlights the need to consider green infrastructure, and directs readers to the Scottish

Governments guidance 'Green Infrastructure: Design & Placemaking', there is no direct requirement for developments to consider green infrastructure in design of buildings (e.g. green / living roofs).

| <b>Policy</b>  | <b>What could be done to enhance green networks</b>  |
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| SG STRLtype2:<br>Greenbelt   | The contribution that the greenbelt makes to the maintenance of green networks in our most populated area could be identified as part of the justification for the policy. The policy itself does not need to specifically identify any requirement to safeguard or enhance green networks.  |
| SG LSD1:<br>Masterplanning   | Guidance on masterplanning needs to introduce the terminology and reference the governments advice on green infrastructure in placemaking. The guidance needs to require developments to link into and enhance any green network, and require any green infrastructure to be connected.  |
| SG LSD5: Public Open Space   | The policy prevents the loss of open space except in a limited number of circumstances. Emphasis needs to be placed on the retention of identified elements of the green network, even when these are outwith settlement boundaries<br>The policy sets a level of open space for new development, but this could be expanded to require open space to be connected both within the site, and to any green infrastructure outwith the site. In the reasoned justification greater emphasis could be placed on open space contributions specifically designed to deliver enhancements to the green network, as promoted by the Parks and Open space strategy.<br>Depending on the level of information which is identified in relation to green networks, a criteria could be added that any development which will fragment or significantly alter a green network is unlikely to be acceptable unless suitable mitigation can be provided. |
| SG LSD6: Public Access   | It is already a requirement of this policy that existing core paths or right of ways are not adversely affected. The contribution that these can make to enjoyment of the green network should be emphasised.  |
| SG Developer Contributions3: Water and waste water drainage infrastructure     | This policy requires SuDs – particularly as part of a masterplan. The contribution SuDs as part of open space can make to a green network should be highlighted, as should the need for SuDs to be considered early in the design process as part of the wider green network.  |
| SG Natural Environment2: Protection of the wider biodiversity and geodiversity | The policy already requires a development to enhance biodiversity<br>The justification mentions the need to prevent fragmentation of habitats but this could be strengthened through references in the supporting text.  |
| SG Safeguarding1: Protection and conservation of the water environment         | Clarification could be provided in the supporting text to show the contribution buffer strips make to green networks. These are key contributions to the blue/green network.   |
| SG Safeguarding3: Protection and conservation of trees and woodland            | The policy does not support the loss of woodland except under a range of circumstances. One of the criteria states there is no unnecessary fragmentation of woodland. The support this gives to the green network should be highlighted in the supporting text   |

- 6.5 A statement in the plan is required to confirm the importance of green network creation, protection and enhancement at the highest level. This may be most appropriately done through the introduction of a policy objective

## **7. Conclusion**

- 7.1 In order to reflect new national thinking on the importance of “green networks”, an element of change is required in the plan. The majority of the actions which a planning authority can undertake to regulate new development to assist in the creation of green networks already exist within the 2012 Local Development Plan, but their value is diminished by the lack of a coordination and direction. Even without change significant contribution to green network creation, protection and enhancement could be achieved.
- 7.2 However, existing policy is not being delivered to best effect, and within the balance of other issues it would seem that creation, protection and enhancement of green networks is losing out to other development objectives. This is matter of clarity rather than intent and could be reconciled by elevating the importance of the creation of green networks within the plan, even to the extent of their creation, protection and enhancement being an objective of the plan.
- 7.3 Other approaches have been considered and dismissed on the basis of the extensive geography of Aberdeenshire and the limited scope for the plan to influence implementation of agricultural and forestry policy. Instead an approach that brings green networks to the fore in development design decisions, and makes best use of existing policies is most likely to be appropriate.

## References

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