

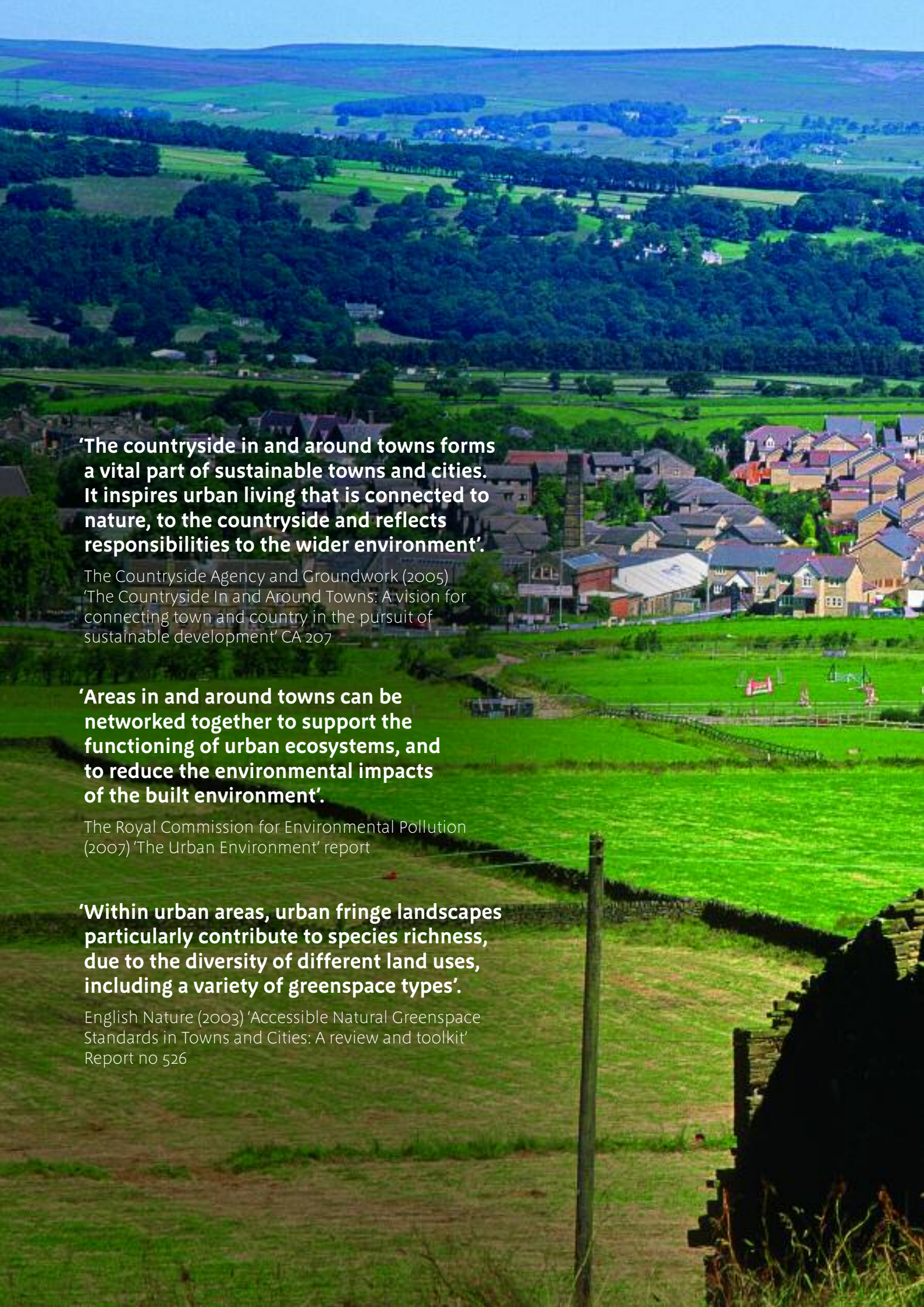


Green Infrastructure and the Urban Fringe:

Learning lessons from the
Countryside In and Around
Towns programme

www.naturalengland.org.uk





'The countryside in and around towns forms a vital part of sustainable towns and cities. It inspires urban living that is connected to nature, to the countryside and reflects responsibilities to the wider environment'.

The Countryside Agency and Groundwork (2005) 'The Countryside In and Around Towns: A vision for connecting town and country in the pursuit of sustainable development' CA 207

'Areas in and around towns can be networked together to support the functioning of urban ecosystems, and to reduce the environmental impacts of the built environment'.

The Royal Commission for Environmental Pollution (2007) 'The Urban Environment' report

'Within urban areas, urban fringe landscapes particularly contribute to species richness, due to the diversity of different land uses, including a variety of greenspace types'.

English Nature (2003) 'Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards in Towns and Cities: A review and toolkit' Report no 526



John Morrison

Introduction

The urban fringe is the extensive area around towns and cities which accounts for more than 20% of the land area of England. It is of critical importance to rural and urban communities alike, and the Countryside In and Around Towns programme (CIAT) has been specifically developed to provide a strategic approach to making best uses of its resources, and to contribute towards sustainable development.

Here we highlight the Countryside In and Around Towns programme's achievements over the last two years, in seeking to demonstrate a vision for the urban fringe through engaging and influencing others to effect change and maximise the potential of this resource. Exemplar demonstration projects are featured along with examples of how linkages have been made, particularly with Green Infrastructure.

The programme provides a solid foundation for Natural England's future work, both on urban and urban fringe policy development, and on Green Infrastructure, whether in Growth Areas, Growth Points or elsewhere in England.

About the Countryside In and Around Towns programme

The CIAT programme was developed as a **strategic** approach to unlocking and making the best use of **resources and opportunities** in the urban fringe for both rural and urban communities.

The programme emerged as a response to the Government's drive for sustainable development, an agenda which requires a multi disciplinary approach involving the effective interaction of a range of policy interventions, including spatial planning, health, transportation, economic development and the environment. Other drivers include climate change and renewable energy, housing, transport, health, education and agricultural diversification.

The Countryside Agency and Groundwork worked in close partnership with the Forestry Commission, English Nature and DEFRA's Rural Development Service to respond to these drivers and develop a 'Vision for the Countryside In and Around Towns' – the vision reflects this context and identifies 10 potential functions:

- A bridge to the country
- A gateway to the town
- A health centre
- A classroom
- A recycling and renewable energy centre
- A productive landscape
- A cultural legacy
- A place for sustainable living
- An engine for regeneration
- A nature reserve

See: http://www.countryside.gov.uk/Publications/articles/Publication_tcm2-22090.asp

Underpinning the vision is the concept of multifunctionality: the integration and interaction of different activities on the same parcel of land. Research has shown that focusing on individual

agendas produces a weaker outcome compared to where agendas and activities are interacting and / or integrated.

Following extensive consultation, the vision was launched by DEFRA and ODPM in January 2005, following which the Countryside Agency immediately established a regional programme of delivery. This builds on learning from previous initiatives in the urban fringe including Country Parks and the Community Forest programme.

The CIAT programme aim (quoted below) demonstrates both its relevance to the sustainable development agenda, and the cross cutting nature that now makes it applicable across Natural England's four strategic outcomes:

“the countryside in and around towns contributes substantially to sustainable development through provision of the public benefits expressed in the vision document.”

Innovation has been at the heart of this programme through what is described as a 'framework' approach. National templates for the delivery process and programme monitoring and evaluation have provided structures within which the regions work, while allowing for local flexibility and variety to reflect individual circumstances. Co-ordination, support and advice have been provided from the national team to regions as they have applied the four programme steps:

Step 1 – regional coalitions: regional groupings championing the CIAT vision and co-ordinating implementation

Step 2 – regional stocktakes: broad regional assessments identifying the extent, state and potential of the urban fringe



Step 3 – influencing: ensuring that relevant and emerging regional, sub regional and local strategies, plans, policies, programmes and projects both reflect the potential of CIAT and where possible create opportunities for applying the vision

Step 4 – exemplars: projects demonstrating co-ordinated action on multifunctionality in the urban fringe

Independent evaluators have acted in a ‘critical friend’ capacity, supporting national and regional teams to develop and implement evaluation strategies and to learn from progress to date. Such participative, formative evaluation is relatively rare; however it provides significant scope for programmes such as this to engage constructively with the evaluation process and to create a ‘learning culture’ with the capacity to respond to contextual changes and to evidence impact on key drivers.

As the programme has developed, so too has the concept and credibility of Green Infrastructure (GI). GI describes the processes by which new and existing greenspaces and green networks are properly planned, designed and integrated into town and country planning in a strategic fashion. Delivery of multifunctionality and GI have frequently overlapped and provided mutually beneficial opportunities for promoting their related principles.

GI was increasingly acknowledged as the key mechanism for regions to deliver the CIAT programme, and in mid 2006 the programme was re-branded as the CIAT / GI programme.

The Government’s ‘Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act’ (2006) established Natural England, the new environmental body bringing together the Landscape, Access and Recreation

division of the Countryside Agency with English Nature and DEFRA’s Rural Development Service. The Act gave Natural England a role within both urban and urban fringe environments, providing an opportunity for joined up policy development and strengthening of their interdependence – aspirations that mirror the thinking of others, including the 6th Environmental Programme of the EU (2006) and the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (2007).

Natural England inherited the CIAT / GI programme, closely related work in Growth Areas and a whole raft of work linked to the wider greenspace agenda. The Government also announced 26 new Growth Points in 2006, which overlapped with a number of CIAT / GI exemplars in four regions.

An internal policy review acknowledged that the time was right to more closely align Natural England’s work on GI, (whether in Growth Areas, new Growth Points or wider in regions), under the umbrella of Natural England’s Sustainable Communities Project.

Natural England will continue to learn from the CIAT / GI programme widely across its work, when developing its policies for urban and urban fringe areas and particularly in the delivery of GI.

The following pages highlight examples of activity under each of the programme’s four delivery steps.

Step 1 in practice: regional coalitions

Effective partnership working lies at the heart of any programme of delivery. Avoiding duplication, **adding value** and **pooling resources** can all be significant benefits of such collaborative working.



Julian Bayne

The cross cutting nature of CIAT / GI inevitably requires a partnership approach. There is no obvious, single organisation at the heart of this agenda yet there is real scope for Natural England to take a co-ordinating lead role.

Regional coalitions have been established across the country – some are pre-existing fora and others are new, developed specifically around CIAT. In each case the coalition has reflected local circumstances and needs.

For example, in the North West the Green Infrastructure Unit aims to promote the CIAT vision and principles to sub regional and local stakeholders and to advocate and develop options for the implementation of GI across the region. It seeks to establish a partnership approach to the

delivery of GI and is itself a partnership between Natural England, the Mersey Forest and the Red Rose Forest.

The Unit has achieved notable success in influencing local authorities on GI. The GI Guide produced by the Unit's 'GI Think Tank' has been well received, and GI has been referenced in the Regional Spatial Strategy and Regional Economic Strategy, and in various sub regional plans including the Merseyside Action Plan and the Manchester City Region Spatial Strategy.

Promoting CIAT / GI in a region where economic and social regeneration are paramount has been challenging. The partnership approach has mitigated some of the difficulties – CIAT / GI has not been aligned with one specific organisation and as a result has attracted a broader appeal than might otherwise have been the case.

Step 2 in practice: regional stocktakes

The CIAT vision envisaged regions undertaking stocktake research to establish the **extent, state** and **potential** of the countryside in and around towns to help in identifying future priorities.



Nick Turner

A number of regions have undertaken GIS modelling exercises to provide this information, to highlight where activities may be better joined up and the degree of multifunctionality in evidence. This work has proved challenging, both in terms of the research undertaken and the useful application of the data generated.

For example, in the West Midlands the intention was to collect a wide range of data, and to develop a system that would be easy to use for staff with no prior GIS experience. These two goals have been achieved by the project's lead organisation, the Green Arc Partnership. Data has been collected across the 10 CIAT functions and a website is now in development to provide partners with access to that information.

The system has already been used in a number of ways; to examine how space is used in the area, and how well the population is served by greenspace, educational opportunities and other indicators of a pleasant living environment, for example. Building on this assessment is an

emerging methodology for determining the most appropriate uses for space as local authorities put together their Local Development Frameworks.

What this and other GIS systems offer is the opportunity to measure change with respect to multifunctionality in the urban fringe – across wide geographical areas or on a project by project basis.

Step 3 in practice: influencing

Influencing activities are at the heart of the CIAT programme and its development has been timely; in many regions it has coincided with the creation of the **Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS)**.



Simon Warner

The RSS is required to present the spatial vision for how each region will look in 15 – 20 years time, and strategic influencing at this level is critical if CIAT / GI is to have real influence on what ultimately happens on the ground.

Influencing the RSS has provided a significant opportunity to integrate multifunctionality and GI concepts into the emerging strategies.

Considerable attention has been paid to ensuring this opportunity is not lost, with a marked degree of success, particularly on GI. For example, the draft North West RSS contains a GI policy which has attracted a broad raft of support from agencies across the area.

GI featured prominently in discussions at the Examination in Public for the East of England RSS. The joint representations of the former Countryside Agency and English Nature have resulted in considerable success in getting GI and the urban fringe recognised in the strategy. The proposed environmental policy is entitled Green Infrastructure and places a requirement on local development documents to ensure that policies have regard to the economic and social as well as environmental benefits of green infrastructure assets – a requirement that could be interpreted as recognising the need for GI to be multifunctional.

In the West Midlands the Regional Planning Guidance is being reviewed and updated, and Natural England is working to ensure that the environment chapters incorporate a GI focus. The London region has similarly achieved considerable success in promoting the GI concept through the effective working of the London GI partnership; it developed the East London Grid Framework which establishes the policy context and spatial framework for GI in East London, and which has been reinforced and amplified through the publication of the East London Green Grid Primer, and the Green Grid Supplementary Planning Guidance. Green Infrastructure has also been embraced by the Mayor and a GI policy is included within the review of the London Plan.

This level of success in influencing RSSs provides a firm foundation for Natural England's work with Growth Points, which requires demonstrable links to the RSS and its priorities.

Regional planning is now more important for the future of the urban fringe than ever before and there will be a continuing need to exert significant influence at this level to ultimately deliver the CIAT vision and Green Infrastructure strategies.

Step 4 in practice: exemplars

Each region has **commissioned** exemplar projects to **test out** various aspects of CIAT.



Jim Hodson

The exemplars vary widely and include multifunctional countryside management and planning activities through to policy development work and researching baseline data collection methodologies.

One such exemplar is the Spatial Planning and Multifunctionality (SPaM) project, sponsored by the North East Community Forests.

This exemplar project is seeking to identify the CIAT multifunctional mixes that are most attractive to planners and developers, while having sufficient appeal to secure the support of local communities. It intends to demonstrate how the land use planning system can create sites that deliver a range of multifunctional benefits.

SPaM is building on the organisations' existing work in this arena, and it is clear that developers and planners are increasingly willing to engage with them to discuss potential schemes. Being able to demonstrate a track record and concrete examples of how to achieve GI benefits from various developments has also been a positive lever in getting a GI approach included in the draft Tees Valley GI Strategy, which will in turn impact on Local Development Frameworks.

Partnership working has also been at the heart of the Plymouth Eastern Corridor Urban Fringe Project, where organisations have collaborated cross border to focus on the urban fringe. The study provides a vision for the area and a framework for its implementation, and will inform two Area Action Plans and a Greenspace Strategy. Partners have had different perspectives over land use planning and management which have been resolved through a process of partnership working and consensus building.

These two examples demonstrate some of the key factors for the successful implementation of CIAT / GI. There have to be the resources and commitment in place for a potentially long period of discussion and negotiation. There is a need to draw on multiple skills and disciplines, and to engage with a range of different partners and organisations beyond those conventionally involved in GI initiatives, particularly the private sector and local communities.

Progress, achievements and future directions

The CIAT programme was never intended as a quick fix for effecting change in the urban fringe; this requires a long term approach. Having said that the direction of travel is indicating significant progress to date.

Overall, the programme has maintained its activities despite a difficult operating context, and in places has succeeded in achieving a considerable amount by contributing towards long term change, as follows.

- It has balanced policy development work with demonstration activities and provided linkages and learning between the two.
- The shift towards using GI as the preferred delivery approach and language is useful. It reflects the current context and prevents a dislocation of effort on the two related agendas of CIAT and GI.
- The framework approach – namely having a vision, four steps to implementation via a nationally co-ordinated programme delivered in regions and a national monitoring and evaluation framework - has been largely successful, and the inherent flexibility has given scope for regional interpretation and adaptation.
- The formative evaluation process has contributed to maintaining the momentum of the programme, while informing future developments: there is a ‘learning culture’.
- The outward looking nature of the programme has forged strong external links, nationally and regionally.
- There has been substantial progress in developing meaningful partnership working, albeit largely with traditional partners at the national and regional level; individual exemplars have had more success in this respect.
- There have been considerable successes in influencing regional strategic planning policy and this inevitably will have a trickle down effect on local development documents and other policies and programmes into the future.
- Innovation and good practice has been evident, particularly in stocktaking and the exemplars.
- Cost effectiveness has been enhanced by a partnership approach which has enabled inputs from other bodies to add value to the programme.

In addition the strong relationship between the programme and NE’s strategic outcomes is clear:

Natural England Strategic Outcomes

CIAT Programme Response

Strategic outcome 1:

a healthy natural environment

The CIAT vision is about the conservation and particularly the enhancement of the urban fringe.

Strategic outcome 2:

enjoyment of the natural environment

The programme is working to create a high quality natural environment close to where most people live, and more opportunities for them to enjoy, understand and support that environment.

Strategic outcome 3:

sustainable use of the natural environment

The CIAT programme is championing the sustainable management and use of urban fringe resources, particularly through a multifunctional approach to land use planning.

Strategic outcome 4:

a secure environmental future

The programme is designed to produce sustainable urban fringe landscapes with a high quality environment, especially green infrastructure, underpinning and providing the sustainability and ‘liveability’ of towns, cities and their surrounding regions.



This picture of a cross cutting programme demonstrates its potential impact on sustainable development. Links can be made with a number of Government PSAs including DEFRA's PSA target one, 'Promoting sustainable development across Government and the country as a whole measured by achieving positive trends in the Government's headline indicators of sustainable development'. CIAT's holistic approach, with a focus on the integration and interaction of functions, relates closely to sustainable development objectives – and is being realised by the activities to influence the development of relevant strategies, policies, plans and programmes, and via exemplar demonstration projects.

The work on CIAT and GI has now been aligned under Natural England's Sustainable Communities Project. Lessons from progress to date will contribute to future developments, and independent evaluators would recommend that the organisation should build on progress in the following ways:

- **Taking the lead role as a national advocate for GI** – as part of a wider partnership Natural England is best placed to take on this mantle and to fill the gap that currently exists.
- **Building on the knowledge base that has been developed and continue learning from progress within the CIAT programme** – ensuring that future work builds on the inheritance of the CIAT programme especially in regional approaches to GI.

- **Undertaking further research and policy development work for the urban fringe and urban areas** – learning the lessons from what has been a predominantly urban fringe programme to contribute to work on the linkages between urbanised areas and the wider environment, and to the evolution of a more joined up 'sustainable towns and cities' approach.
- **Wider adoption of the framework approach to delivery, including the application of formative evaluation, particularly for ongoing GI work** – applying the framework model more widely within Natural England to help manage the relationships of regional delivery within a national programme, and embedding formative evaluation to create a learning culture.
- **Embedding the principles of multifunctionality and GI within Natural England** – exploring how this cross cutting agenda can underpin the organisation's work across the range of its activities.

What is clear is that Natural England should recognise the achievements of the CIAT programme, of its cross cutting approach and what has been delivered over a short and difficult period. Delivering an agenda such as this requires a long term approach, and this in itself may require Natural England to adapt its planning and practices. This solid foundation should be built on in future policy development and delivery.



Natural England will work for people, places and nature, to enhance biodiversity, landscapes and wildlife in rural, urban, coastal and marine areas; promoting access, recreation and public well-being, and contributing to the way natural resources are managed so that they can be enjoyed now and by future generations.

This is one of a range of publications published by Natural England.

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