

Excellence in Place Leadership Programme 2021

Session 2: Green Renewal

Re-imagining our approach to Zero Carbon through nature conservation

"Nature conservation is key to hitting Zero Carbon, but still low profile, and its funding is a mess. What would a more comprehensive approach to investment in nature conservation renewal look like?"

Background

The Environmental Audit Committee's February 2021 report "Growing Back Better: Putting Nature & Net Zero at the Heart of the Economic Recovery" made it clear that achieving a greener future hinges on the health of the nation's biodiversity and ecosystems. "The economic recovery must not overlook nature recovery," it said. "Planning and infrastructure decisions must take into account the impact of nature."

The Covid-19 pandemic, the report added, must be treated as a wake-up call; a symptom of a growing global ecological emergency. But, it warned, there will be "no vaccine against runaway climate change". It is our responsibility to use the post-Covid economic recovery to set the UK on track for net zero carbon.

Business as usual is not an option. Instead, the recovery must be treated as an opportunity to 'grow back better'. If we fail, "the global collapse in biodiversity, together with the impacts of pollution and the climate crisis, may, if left unchecked, result in an even more catastrophic crisis," said the report.

Putting nature at the heart of place

As pointed out a year ago in the Government's Natural Capital Committee report "Using nature-based interventions to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050", nature-based interventions – both to mitigate emissions and adapt to future climate - can deliver results at a fraction of the cost of engineered solutions and when delivered effectively can enhance the stocks of natural assets and ecosystem services.

However, the report highlighted that "no significant progress has been made towards most of the 25-year environmental plan goals since 2011, with many areas in decline. Despite overwhelming evidence that nature-based interventions will be fundamental in reversing these declines and delivering net zero."

For the post-Covid crisis, public sector funding will remain a challenge when it comes to delivering new green renewal policies, despite the fact that non-governmental organisation funding for biodiversity is continuing to rise.

In its 2020 Budget, the UK Government announced an £800 million Carbon Capture and Storage Infrastructure Fund and a £1.3 billion, four-year Electric Vehicle charging infrastructure programme. However, these amounts are very small compared to the £27 billion, 5-year roadbuilding programme also being funded.



Surrey County Council - the Greener Future Investment Multiplier Programme

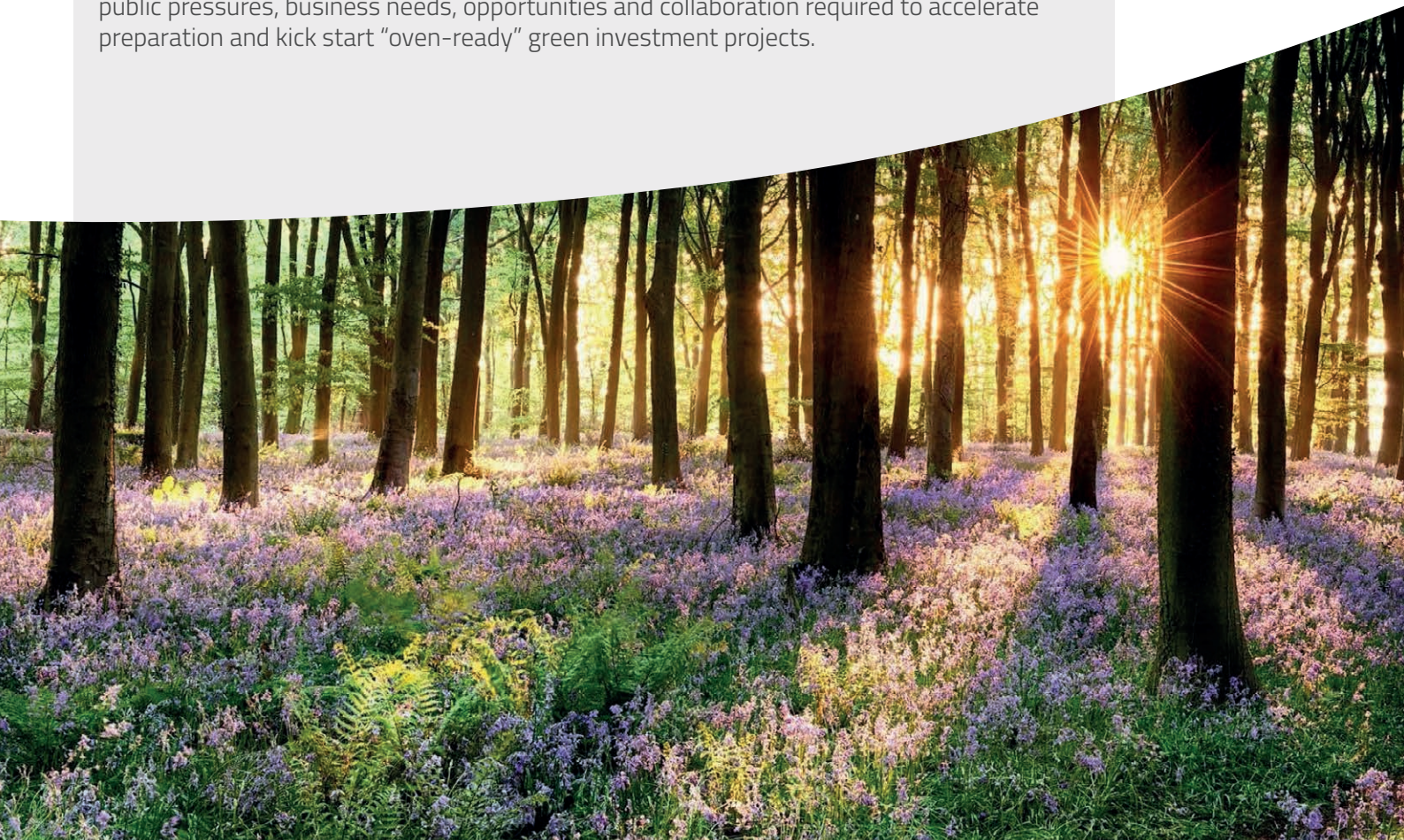
The starting point for Surrey's re-imagined approach to carbon reduction is the acceptance that "natural capital is the first infrastructure on which place is 'built'". But the approach is also founded on the understanding that natural solutions provide the community with natural "free" benefits such as carbon sequestration, natural flood risk management, water storage, temperature control and pest management.

Sadly, the parallel reality is that despite the heightened post-lockdown appetite by the public to embrace the natural environment, conservation remains the poor relation when it comes to attracting public investment.

With public sector funding in decline the reality is that public health and prevention, adult social care, education, transport, youth unemployment and infrastructure investment to level-up the economy remain the headline grabbers when it comes to the public purse.

The Greener Future Investment Multiplier Programme attempts to tackle this on-going problem by forging a strong link between community need, investment in natural capital solutions and the wider social opportunities that can be delivered as a result using outcome-based budgeting.

It is a strategy framework for driving action, identifying and linking available funding sources such as grants, private sector investment, Green Bonds and crowd funding with the policies, public pressures, business needs, opportunities and collaboration required to accelerate preparation and kick start "oven-ready" green investment projects.



Challenging, provoking and inspiring ideas beyond day-to-day, tactical, technical solutions

1 Unlocking the power of nature: how can we harness nature's potential through delivery of nature-based solutions?

Climate change and biodiversity are inextricably linked, explained Marian Spain, Chief Executive of Natural England. We have to change our approach to see natural capital as a key part of the solution, and conversely understand that if we don't tackle climate change, we cause severe problems in our natural environment.

As the February 2021 Dasgupta Review "The Economics of Biodiversity" pointed out "our unsustainable engagement with nature is endangering the prosperity of current and future generations". An often-overlooked reality is that investment in green infrastructure brings with it both health benefits and economic benefits for communities.

The increased demand by the public to get out into the UK's natural environment during Covid-19 has highlighted the fact that nature does matter to people. But the need to tackle cultural, geographic and economic inequalities such as access to gardens and access to outdoor activity have also been brought to the fore.

Change of use across the natural environment is inevitable and adapting to climate change is an integral part of re-thinking nature recovery. However, greater investment and thought to accelerate the natural environment's role in mitigating climate change and driving towards a net zero carbon future is vital. This has to go beyond the usual tree planting and woodland creation solutions to include schemes such as peat land and salt marsh restoration and heathland protection.

Key issues to resolve include:

1. Global challenges need local plans.

How do we make local nature recovery networks link with central government investment and development strategies? Achieving the right balance between investing in adaptation and investing in mitigation will be crucial.

2. Creating a gold thread.

How do we create and weave net zero carbon strategic thinking through all national policy and ensure it reaches the local plan level? Should the delivery of this approach be top-down or bottom-up to maximise success?

3. Maximising the benefits of natural capital requires engagement with a far bigger and more diverse group of stakeholders.

The funding is there for projects - the challenge is how to bundle and bind different sources and outcomes and help the public, private and third sector work together.

"It is important to present environmental solutions not as nice to have luxuries but as business solutions to much bigger issues. You have to get people to understand the solution beyond the economics."

Marian Spain,
Chief Executive,
Natural England

2 Targeting net zero carbon development through nature conservation

Developer Arnold White Group has formed a deliberate strategic focus around innovative green growth. Building social opportunities such as local training, employment and job creation into its schemes by harnessing renewable power generation and creating new low carbon community resources, such as electric vehicle charging stations.

An example of this new thinking is seen in its former quarry development site at Checkley Wood which lies between Milton Keynes and Dunstable in Bedfordshire. The site's current 950 homes are supported by two wind turbines and a solar array which power the area, but also feed into a new electric vehicle charging and transport hub with ultra-rapid charging alongside the A5 trunk road at Heath and Reach.

Knowing the political dynamics and latest thinking in the area is key, explained Nicholle Phillips, Strategic Land Director at Arnold White Group. Leadership is important, she explained, particularly when working with local authorities where it can be hard to link local plans with other stakeholder organisations' policies and objectives.

She was clear that the planning system can and must play a crucial role in tackling the climate crisis and enabling places to adapt to the new environment, so that they are more relevant to communities. Explaining these impacts and benefits in a way that appeals and matters to communities is crucial.

"The key is to explain the proposal not in terms of numbers, but in terms of benefits to people - the messaging has to be simple and relevant so people won't push it away. Graphics are very important - be more pictorial and less wordy."

Nicholle Phillips,
Strategic Land Director,
Arnold White Group



3 Helping communities to think differently about their natural infrastructure

The Tideway Tunnels project is building a new sewer beneath the River Thames in London. The wider challenge was to persuade the often hostile local communities along the 30km route that the project brought benefits to them, the environment and for the whole of London.

Given that the project will stop 40 million tonnes of raw sewage flowing into the river every year, there are clear environmental and local benefits. So, the question that the Tideway Tunnels project team wrestled with, explained Andy Mitchell, Thames Tideway Chief Executive, was “why do we feel good about this project while no one else seems to?”

The solution was to widen their thinking beyond the primary use of the infrastructure – to accept and celebrate that it is not there just to clean up the Thames but also to promote a new public relationship with the river. Rather than describing the project in the usual fact-based, technical language the team talked about the need to “rekindle a broken love affair” and “reconnect Londoners’ relationship” with the Thames.

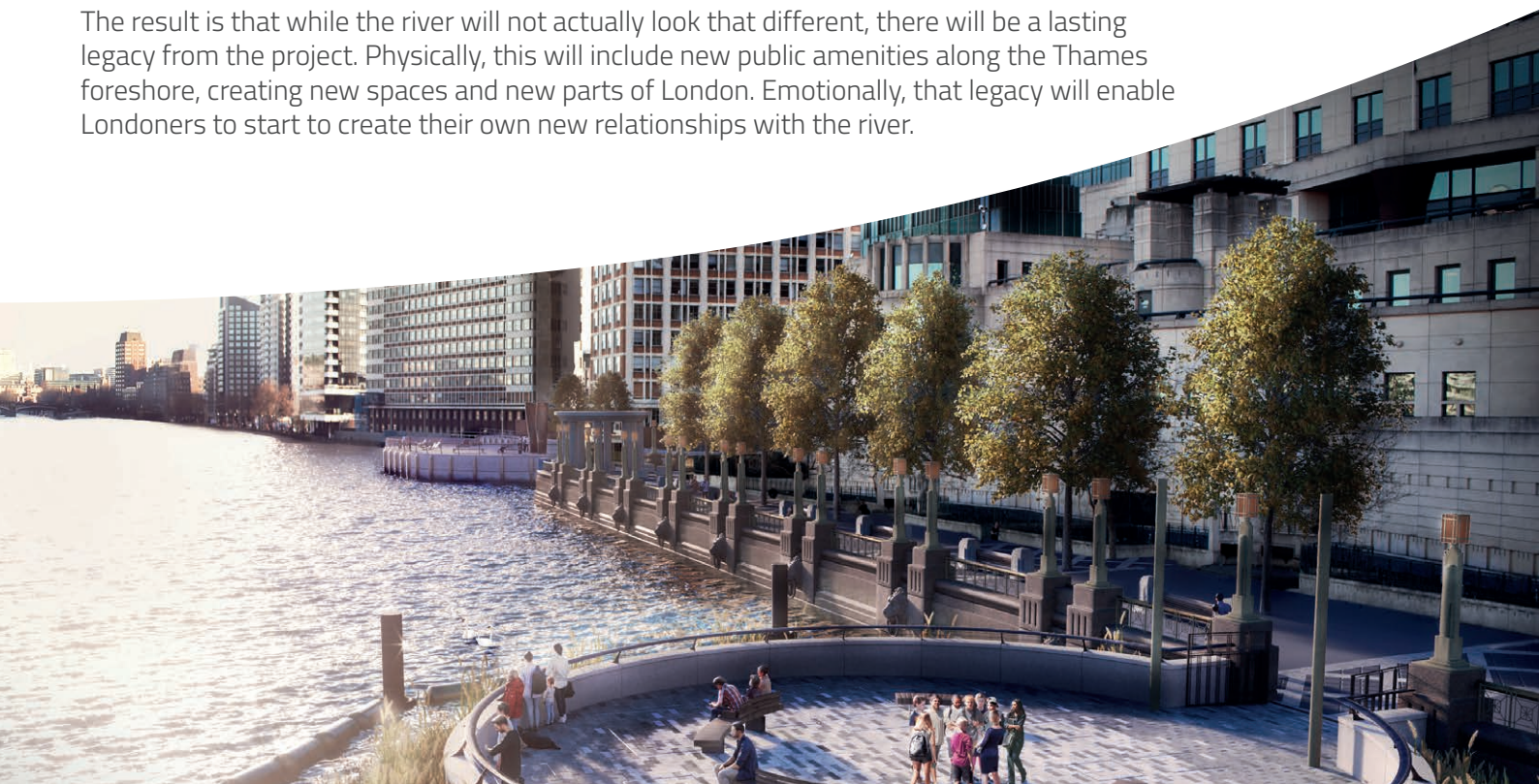
“The challenge was to help people think differently about the River Thames as an open space. At the moment the river is taken for granted; it’s hidden in full view and not taken seriously or thought of as a public space,” explained Mitchell.

Having established this vision, the challenge, explained Mitchell, was to translate his team’s passion for this outcome into a vocabulary for expressing it. To do this, the team embraced a fun and playful approach to imagine what might happen when the project was complete, and they had successfully reconnected Londoners with the River Thames.

The result is that while the river will not actually look that different, there will be a lasting legacy from the project. Physically, this will include new public amenities along the Thames foreshore, creating new spaces and new parts of London. Emotionally, that legacy will enable Londoners to start to create their own new relationships with the river.

“Convincing people starts by being brave. You have to work on the internal narrative and make the story work, but then you have to be brave enough to invest in a vision, then brave enough to say it in public.”

Andy Mitchell,
Chief Executive,
Thames Tideway



Green Renewal Workshops

Green renewal programme objectives

This session aimed to help Place Leaders identify and navigate a route through green renewal that will assist them in their day-to-day work. The session provided the freedom and permission to step back from tactical objectives to focus on longer term strategic planning to create post-Covid growth in community outcomes through the specific lens of:

- *leadership, capacity and skills needs;*
- *collaboration opportunities;*
- *demography and end user dynamics and;*
- *technology and data opportunities*

The session clarified and defined the key features of organisational response to climate emergency and highlighted resources required to bridge the blockages and formulate new strategies that will underpin the delivery of better future nature-based outcomes.

The first workshop focused on what was preventing better solutions being driven at scale and pace and what needed to change to enable this to happen. Each group prioritised their top brakes, blockages and changes.

The second workshop focused on taking the outputs from workshop one and painting a picture of what 'better' would look like. Once 'better' was agreed, each group defined a plan of how to get there.



Group One: Leadership, Capacity and Skills Needs

Workshop One: What needs to be different?

1. The brakes and blockages

- *Do we have the right skills and people to take on this challenge?*
- *Our siloed organisations make it hard to work more collaboratively*
- *Getting political buy in - you will struggle without it*

2. What needs to change?

- *Different skills and experiences are required along the development journey*
- *Golden threads referencing climate change are required through all policy documents*
- *Strategies need to start small and build up over time with confidence*
- *Understand what is upsetting local people and change the narrative as required*

Workshop Two: What looks better and what's your plan to get there?

3. The picture of 'better'

- *An organisation working in perfect harmony*

4. The plan to get there

This group focussed on the need for 'a new way of working' with improved corporate profile and leadership for nature conservation, bringing the general public/communities, politicians and private sector collaboratively together with these listed changes implicit in this new model. Suggested actions included:

- *Develop a common cohesive approach to create more diverse inputs*
- *Place open collaboration and transparency at the centre of thinking*



Group Two: Collaboration Opportunities

Workshop One: What needs to be different?

1. The brakes and blockages

- *Lack of co-ordination across the funding landscape*
- *The competition for funding pots can lead to unnecessary infighting*
- *Funding is awarded by parameters that do not always consider biodiversity and sustainability*
- *Lack of understanding of the issues at the political level*
- *Lack of skills and competencies across the local authority landscape*
- *Poor understanding of the power of the environment as an enabler for tackling other issues*

2. What needs to change?

- *A clearer understanding of the value and prioritisation of the environment - from the top down*
- *More education to enable a better understanding of where the money is and how to bundle it to drive investment*
- *Outcome based budgeting and planning*
- *A shared vision and narrative to bring together County and District Councils, stakeholders and partners*
- *Greater collaboration at a local level so as to better influence national government with a coherent strategy.*

Workshop Two: What looks better and what's your plan to get there?

3. The picture of 'better'

- *Nature becomes an outcome enabler rather than simply a planting solution*
- *More attractive and economically active high streets*
- *Social exclusion and loneliness eradicated*

4. The plan to get there

Focus should be on the need for 'an outcome led approach' and on the central role that nature conservation must play in the big social and economic agendas in a locality. Suggested actions included:

- *Local authorities are fundamental and must be at the heart of the solution for communities. People and teams are needed with the skills to interact with communities and find out what outcomes people really want.*
- *Look through the environment and sustainability lens to see how environment can be an enabler.*
- *Identify influencers, decision makers*
- *Engage and educate*



Group Three: Demography and End User Dynamics

Workshop One: What needs to be different?

1. The brakes and blockages

- Rural issues are pitted against urban issues, and often not capacity to understand every local area and its priorities in the depth required
- Broad untargeted messaging does not work
- The public often has other priorities – their livelihoods, jobs and the economy sit above the environment

2. What needs to change?

- The evidence base has to be nuanced to be meaningful to communities
- Strategies have to be personal and meaningful – answering the question around 'what's in it for me' - engaging the young as well as the elderly
- Better understanding who the community leaders are and the influences that link the agenda long-term while resonating with people

Workshop Two: What looks better and what's your plan to get there?

3. The picture of 'better'

- A better engaged community
- Higher levels of environmental literacy
- Greater community ownership of natural spaces
- Solutions that reflect the whole community, not just the loudest 5%
- Environmental issues pushed further up the policy agenda

4. The plan to get there

A 'bottom-up community led movement' is needed for nature conservation underpinned by improved community environmental literacy and ownership of natural capital. This would drive up political prioritisation. Suggested action included:

- Clearer stakeholder mapping
- Stronger prioritisation of the environmental agenda
- Integration of the net zero carbon agenda into all policies
- Robustly resourced plans to move natural capital up the political agenda



Group Four: Technology and Data Opportunities

Workshop One: What needs to be different?

1. The brakes and blockages

- *Knowing where the data is kept, who owns it and whether they will share it*
- *Information silos plus a lack of development space and freedom to experiment*
- *Lack of understanding how to communicate with the public*
- *Lack of visualisation of data to influence decision making.*

2. What needs to change?

- *Identifying where data is held and by who*
- *Better use of data and social media would remove the need for expensive paper-based consultations*
- *Better inform businesses about change*
- *Engaging technology and technical capacity to better visualise data and use it more effectively*
- *Clearer guidance on the legislative aspect of data capture*
- *Learn how to get best value out of data*

Workshop Two: What looks better and what's your plan to get there?

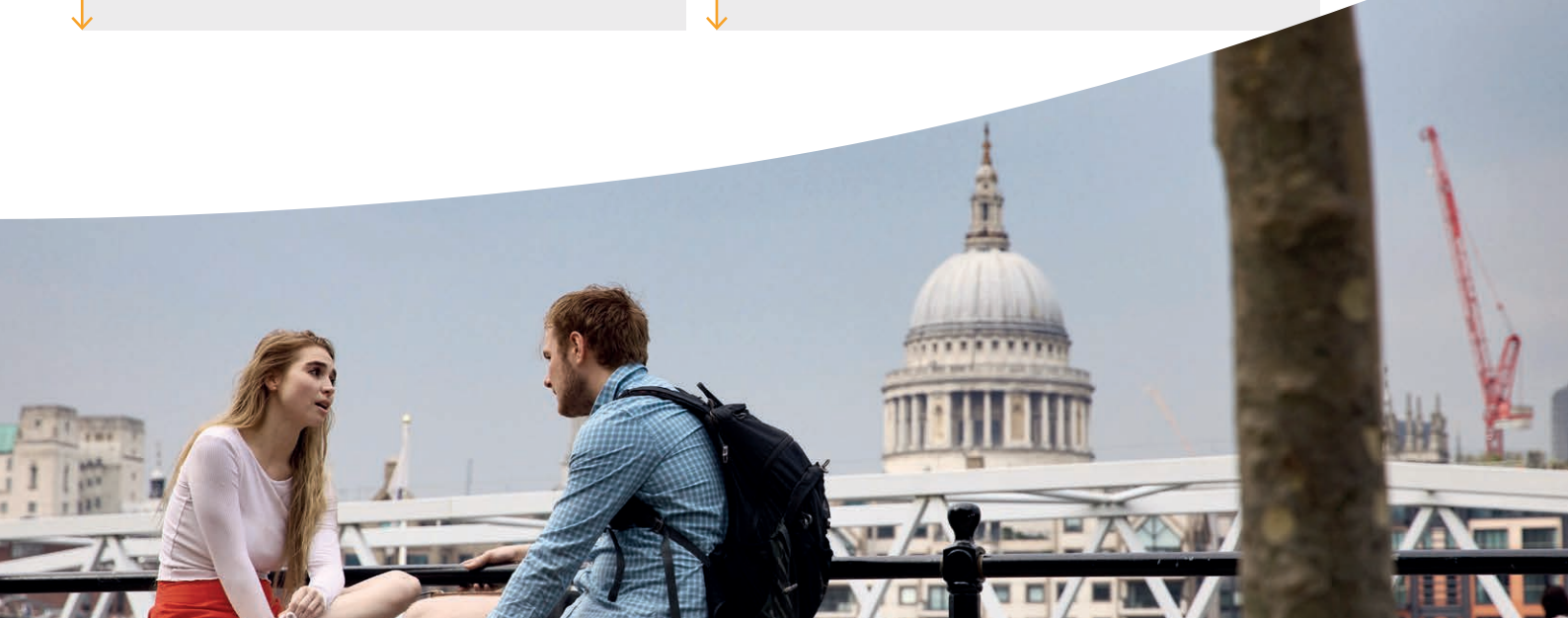
3. The picture of 'better'

- *Data is used as a key tool and is at the centre of decision making*
- *Readily available and accessible data sources*
- *Technology used to change the narrative, boost equality and engage more people*
- *Investing in capturing data – how to use the right assessment tools in the most effective way*

4. The plan to get there

The focus should be on the need for a much improved 'evidence led approach to nature conservation'. Suggested actions included:

- *Form an ADEPT data group to drive policy and promote change across the sector*
- *Create an environment for experimenting and trialling solutions*
- *Commercialise the use of data through public/private partnering*
- *Make greater use of existing digital tools and platforms*



Questions for discussion at the start of EiPL session 3

Question 1: Demonstrating the value of natural capital. What is the role of technology and how can we boost the number and quality of digital tools available to help local authority place leaders to put natural capital at the heart of the planning and development decisions that they make?

Question 2: Boosting meaningful collaboration. How should the EiPL cohort engage and work with organisations such as Natural England to create products or programmes that might help local authorities to meet net zero carbon targets?

Question 3: Being brave; embracing new. How can local authority leaders “manage up” to change the culture of their organisation and break from “business as usual” commercial strategies to embrace unfamiliar natural capital or socially driven decisions?

Question 4: “Trees are not always the solution”. What tools do local authority place leaders need to think about so as to judge the relative merits between, say, planting trees, saving newts, boosting air quality and protecting communities?

Next session

Friday 11th June 2021

Organisational Renewal: re-imagining the way our people and services work; defining what an organisation should feel like in future.