

Thames estuary parklands back at the top of the agenda



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Thames Gateway
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I was very much heartened by the Government's recent announcement that the Thames Gateway is to be one of first group of Local Nature Partnerships (LNP). I have always passionately believed that regeneration in the Thames Estuary should begin with the landscape; it's most outstanding and unifying feature. This was the guiding principle for my Thames Estuary Parklands initiative - the LNP can be readily welcomed as the Coalition's endorsement of this strategy.

Taking a much needed high level overview of local natural environments, the ambition for LNPs is that they will help their local area to manage the natural environment as a holistic system and to embed its value in local decisions for the common benefit of nature, people and the economy. To do this effectively, they will need to be self-sustaining strategic partnerships of a broad range of local organisations, businesses and people, with the credibility, and indeed clout, to work with and influence other local decision makers. Effectively the Thames Gateway LNP will crystallise the partnership working that has been quietly taking forward both the vision and the reality of the Thames Estuary Parklands initiative.

I am often asked what the 'big idea' is when questioned about a project - here, in this 80km long estuary, the big idea is not a single mono-manic project, but rather an overarching vision which holds that landscape is the primary infrastructure - something that is fundamental to creating a sense of place and a feeling of belonging. If this vision of a coherent connected landscape is the 'picture on the box', then the 'pieces in the puzzle' are the myriad of regional, local and community schemes that the public, private, and third sectors are already beginning to realize.

What isn't much understood is how much progress has already been made on the ground, with great strides in transforming the perceptions of place and the quality of life being made. All over the estuary, new high quality landscapes are being created, which will have lasting impact on the environ-

mental, social and economic potential of the estuary. By the end of 2011 alone, over 15 significant initiatives had been completed, offering no less than 26 square kilometres of new or enhanced green space, 95 km of additional footpaths and cycle ways, 10km of improved watercourse, 5 new brand new visitor/education centres, and much else besides, before one starts to list the often transformative local initiatives.

But this isn't about just creating a pleasant environment for its own sake - it's about the hard headed recognition that a high quality of life is needed to attract those who want to live, work, visit, and indeed invest here, and for existing people who want to build their futures in the estuary. All of these initiatives, whether macro or micro, are slowly, but surely, contributing to a connected landscape, linked by a network of green grids (extending the excellent green grid planning in East London by the GLA and Design for London), giving improved access to both urban and rural landscapes, and, by implication, recognising the holistic value of these enhanced landscapes.

What is also striking is the broad political concord about the vision, from the last Government's commission to bring together all of the strands of work in the Thames Estuary into our Thames Gateway Parklands Initiative, through to the real fit with the Coalition's localism agenda - I see the choice of the Thames Estuary as one of the first LNPs as recognition of that concord, and as a soundly based vehicle for holding the holistic vision, whilst informing and guiding all of the hundreds of local interests.

Credit for bringing the Thames Estuary Parklands back to the top of the agenda must go to the Green Infrastructure Partnerships of 'Greening the Gateway Kent & Medway' and 'Parklands South Essex', and the consistent support from their local authority partners in the region, in particular from Kent and Essex, and from councils across the east of Greater London.

The new LNP will meet shortly for the first time as a recognised group, to confirm its strategy and objectives, and to harness the new energy that is increasingly evident throughout the Estuary. As interim chair for the first twelve months of the LNP, I will endeavour to hold and drive forward that strategic vision, and to ensure that a set of priorities is developed and adopted by its broad membership, a membership that is influential and knowledgeable enough to raise awareness of the value of the natural environment.

Akin perhaps to Darwin's 'Tangled Bank', the Thames Estuary is a region full of complexities and contradictions, of natural ordering and co-dependencies. The task of the LNP is to learn from the specifics of this place and to support and guide the quiet and steady progress of this broad membership and the communities and environments they represent. Our ambition must be to enable the creation of an exceptional landscape, one that transforms our perceptions of place. ■

Thames Gateway Jigsaw -
bottom up regeneration,
but with a picture on the
box

