

in our backyard: the social promise of environmentalism

Ken Worpole

with responses from
Hazel Blears MP
Don Foster MP
Damian Green MP



"green alliance..."

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Groundwork

Groundwork is working towards a society made up of sustainable communities which are vibrant, healthy and safe, which respect the local and global environment and where individuals and enterprise prosper. Its purpose is to help build sustainable communities through joint environmental action.

Green Alliance

Green Alliance is one of the UK's foremost environmental groups. An independent charity, its mission is to promote sustainable development by ensuring that the environment is at the heart of decision-making. It works with senior people in government, parliament, business and the environmental movement to encourage new ideas, dialogue and constructive solutions.

new politics series

Green Alliance's *New Politics* pamphlets provide a platform for eminent thinkers to examine interactions between current political debate and environmental thinking. The views expressed are those of the authors.

Other pamphlets in the *New Politics* series are:

- *Sustaining Europe: A common cause for the European Union in the new century*, Ian Christie, December 1999
- *Mind over Matter: Greening the new economy*, Charles Leadbeater, September 2000

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summary

This pamphlet explores the ways in which environmental projects can help provide a new focus and direction to many of the wider problems of the 'social agenda', as currently understood by the major political parties. Concerns of environmentalists have often been seen as separate from - and even indifferent towards - issues of poverty, crime, anti-social forms of behaviour and other aspects of social exclusion. Yet a closer look at people's widely expressed concerns about the quality and management of local environments often reveals a clear overlap between social and environmental factors.

New forms of 'environmental citizenship' might be the best way to tackle current public indifference to the mainstream political process, developing more active and productive forms of democratic responsibility and accountability. Such processes are likely to enhance that movement towards greater neighbourhood self-sufficiency and self-management which all political parties today claim to seek. In short, many of the strategic social goals set out by the political parties can be achieved through forms of environmental regeneration. The pamphlet principally addresses these issues at the neighbourhood level, though it argues that at all levels, environmental improvement and social justice are invariably interwoven.

Following the main essay, representatives from the three main political parties offer responses, discussing how their party is working to meet the challenges that *In Our Backyard* sets out.

the politics of environmental awareness

The environmental movement in the UK today stands at a crossroads. The goodwill felt towards it for its past campaigning on behalf of endangered species and tropical rain forests, and other distant and exotic activities, seems to have reached a plateau. The closer environmentalists move on to home territory - raising issues about the long term sustainability of Western levels of resource consumption, challenging the conventional economics of growth, and putting the onus for achieving radical environmental change on personal and corporate responsibility - the higher the political stakes are raised.

Political parties, which, despite espousing different means, all claim to share the common goal of increased wealth and opportunity for all, may wish to put some distance between themselves and an environmentalism that questions whether even current standards of living - however unequally distributed - are sustainable in the long term. There has to be some way out of this dilemma: is it possible to lead fuller lives and more environmentally responsible ones at the same time? This is not just a question for environmentalists. It

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is one of the key political questions of our time. Yet so often political parties keep it out of vision, because of the large-scale implications it has for how we might do politics differently in the future.

However, ‘business as usual’ is no longer sustainable. The political commentator Andrew Marr suggests that the move towards environmentalism, slow though it may be, is now inexorable:

The evidence of climate change piles up with ominous and irresistible force. It affects every sentient voter, every gardener, everyone insuring their property, people living by coasts and rivers ... It is still true that, asked to choose between lower global emissions and keeping a second car, most voters keep the car. But it is becoming less true. Progress is infuriatingly slow and conventional politics remains clogged with old thinking. There will be many reverses to come. But the trend is one way.¹

Rather than simply wait for further environmental degradation to occur and jolt people into awareness, political parties should explore ways in which people’s apprehensions about their more immediate environment could be channeled into more positive political aspirations and goals.

This requires a re-thinking of what we mean by the term ‘environment’, and a more nuanced understanding of popular attitudes, particularly by environmentalists.

A low priority?

It is a widely-held belief that the British people remain basically uninterested in environmental issues, and as a result, politicians pay only lip service to the green agenda. Recycling levels are amongst the lowest in the developed world. The vote for green candidates remains low, and environmental issues rarely get highlighted in the media, other than as scare stories about the potential consequences of GM foods, or dramatic photo-stories about hunt saboteurs and the future of the countryside. These are frequently presented as human interest stories - about the threat to personal health or historic cultural traditions raised by environmentalist concerns. There is rarely a more considered explication of whether current levels of consumption and exploitation of natural resources in the developed world can be maintained without risking global environmental catastrophe. Likewise, a continuing debate about what is meant by ‘growth’ rarely features, not surprisingly, given the media’s dependence on consumer advertising.

Some of those with a particular commitment to social issues characterise the environmental

movement as ‘middle class’ or anti-modern, seeing environmentalists as a small minority fuelled by a sense of guilt about hedonistic lifestyles and the over-consumption of material goods. Or they are seen as belonging to a long-standing history of rural protectionism, in which environmental degradation becomes a reason for keeping the urban majority from visiting the countryside. In this view, the problems of consumer over-indulgence or affronted rural sensibilities seem trivial in comparison with other political priorities, particularly for the present government which has made a flagship of its policies for tackling urban crime, poverty and social exclusion in ‘the real world’.

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The recent Fabian pamphlet by Michael Jacobs, *Environmental Modernisation: The new Labour agenda*, clearly touched a nerve within the Labour government, and has quickly become one of the more influential political polemics of recent times, though whether it will achieve the political outcomes it desires remains another matter.² Jacobs describes an “inescapable feeling that the environment does not really figure in the New Labour ‘project’.” He claims that “almost uniquely among significant areas of policy, on the environment New Labour doesn’t seem to know what it thinks.” This is strong stuff.

Yet to what extent does the environmental question figure in the political philosophies of the other main parties? William Hague, Leader of the

Conservative Party, believes that a combination of modernising market forces combined with individual responsibility will solve the problem, and has said that “we must trust and inspire volunteers, local communities and organisations to preserve and improve their own communities.”³

Charles Kennedy, Leader of the Liberal Democrats, believes that large changes in public attitudes are required, and that “Without a ‘green culture’, government will legislate in vain.”⁴ While the political leaders hope to see important changes made, they are expecting individuals and communities to take the lead, wary of moving too far ahead of public opinion - particularly where environmentalism calls into question other political priorities the parties may endorse. Kennedy has been honest enough to admit that “Even we, Liberal Democrats, too many of us, certainly myself included, have ducked some tough questions. We haven’t talked about the environment nearly enough in the past few years.” Is it not time for the political parties to re-think their position on these vital concerns?

Through the other end of the telescope

In terms of the wider political landscape, the outlook seems grim. Yet through the other end of the telescope, looking at environmental awareness in its most local manifestations, the situation is quite different. Survey after survey of public opinion about loyalty and attachment to place - home, street and neighbourhood - reveals that an

acute sensitivity to environmental factors dominates people’s concerns and aspirations.

A national study of a cross section of UK residents, carried out for the Tidy Britain Group, found 34 per cent ‘very interested’ in

environmental issues, and the proportion of people ‘fairly interested’ in environmental issues increased to 53 per cent. Only 10 per cent were ‘not very interested’ and only 2 per cent ‘not interested at all’.⁵ However, what the respondents in this survey defined as environmental issues were vandalism, dog mess,

littered streets, unsafe bathing water, roadside dumping - the environmental issues which they felt impinged upon their daily life and interests, and which made life less pleasant and enjoyable.

Similar results emerged from a study identifying *Patterns of neighbourhood dissatisfaction in England* in which crime, dogs, poor leisure facilities, vandalism and litter were the major perceived issues of area dissatisfaction.⁶ In a similar study, part of the early Social Exclusion Unit publication, *Bringing Britain together*, people cite the top four ‘major dislikes’ of their area as: crime/feeling unsafe, vandalism/threatening behaviour, unsupervised youngsters, litter/general appearance.⁷

On a smaller scale, the English MP, Denis McShane, recently described a Rotherham survey of voters’ concerns asking people to itemise the issues

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which concerned them most: “by far the biggest issue was litter.”⁸ The lesson for politicians that McShane picked up was that “all politics is local,” and that national politicians ignore these issues at their peril.

Environmentalism is ordinary

We could choose to ignore such surveys, or relegate popular concerns about litter, graffiti and neglected walkways and parks to the minor political league. Yet in survey after survey of householders’ preferences about where they want to live, or what is most wrong about where they currently live, a clean, well-ordered place figures highly in most people’s aspirations. This surely makes a good starting point for a social politics that embodies an environmental vision as well. The

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critic Raymond Williams once wrote that “culture is ordinary.” It greatly helps to see that environmentalism is ‘ordinary’ too. It goes to the very heart of the way people live from day to day, and

determines whether they find this experience rewarding and enjoyable, or frustrating and embittering. The problem is that ordinariness is often politically invisible.

If litter is beyond the view of Westminster politicians, take another ‘ordinary’ environmental

issue: walking. Walking is the one of the most popular and benign forms of human transport, making up 80 per cent of journeys less than one mile in length, yet it is completely marginal to the Government’s understanding of transport policy. As Ben Plowden of the Pedestrians’ Association has neatly put it, walking is the glue that binds the transport system

together.⁹ Most travel is still local, with over 70 per cent of all trips, and even 56

per cent of car trips, under five miles. Yet, to quote one recent report, “pedestrian planning is in its infancy.”¹⁰ So, too, is planning for cycling.

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So often, politicians and transport professionals are hooked on the big schemes. Mainstream transport policy and practice continues to assume that long journeys are more important than short journeys, even though common sense suggests that escorting children to school, the pensioner’s daily shopping trip, the business transaction conducted in the street or in the cafe are as socially and economically important as the motorway commuter journey. Environmentalism often delivers in the detail. The ordinary can be very radical and transformative indeed.

Another thing that social policy and environmental policy share is an understanding of how the small things in life are linked to the bigger waves and currents. Small problems can lead to bigger ones, and uncollected rubbish and a poorly maintained physical environment can in time engender social breakdown. A recent survey

of neighbourhoods under social stress emphasised the embitterment produced by the closure, boarding up or, even worse, demolition of local public and commercial buildings, giving “the overwhelming impression to residents that these neighbourhoods were on a downward trajectory.”¹¹ Poorly maintained neighbourhoods create a sense of powerlessness, a world in a state of entropy - exactly a parallel of that powerlessness and pessimism which affect some global environmentalists when they consider the prospects of our ‘runaway world’.

Degraded environments produce what Ian Christie has called the ‘Nothing Ever Seems to Happen Syndrome’ whereby long-standing eyesores, accident blackspots, leaking school roofs, crime hotspots or fly-tipping sites are recognised by everybody as a problem, and yet no action is taken, or can be ‘afforded’. This fuels public cynicism about politicians and the political process, and these places become a visible emblem of decision-makers’ distance and indifference. When Wendy Thompson became Chief Executive of Newham Council, one of her first initiatives was a local ‘eyesores’ campaign, jointly run with a local newspaper. People were invited to nominate their most hated local eyesores in the borough, and those responsible for the 20 most frequently cited were publicly named and shamed into action. Sometimes these were council-owned eyesores,

sometimes private, sometimes utility works. The success of this scheme reaped greater public approval than many other regeneration projects - and it cost hardly anything to achieve.

Just as the ‘broken window syndrome’ became a paradigm of the new zero tolerance policing policies - based on the premise that if you don’t quickly address the small infringements and felonies, then the big crimes shortly follow - perhaps politicians should be arguing for a zero tolerance policy towards broken pavements, unkempt parks, leaking school buildings, traffic noise and unnecessary CO₂ emissions. It is not just politicians who should get back to the basics. Environmentalists themselves have often shown too little regard for the everyday environmental concerns of ordinary people.

Half full or half empty? The paradox of environmental awareness

How do we begin to explain this widespread contradiction between low levels of national political concern and activity about environmental issues, and high levels of local concern? Is the cup of environmental awareness in the UK half full or half empty? Perhaps the problem derives from a confusion of vocabulary and definition. The language that we are starting to use to describe issues of economy, environmentalism and social policy has to work very hard to cover all the apparent contradictions between them, a point made strongly in the recent Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR)

report, *Towards a Language of Sustainable Development*. This report states clearly and presciently that:

*The language of Sustainable Development is one of environmental, economic and social politics. It is born out of a desire to embrace a number of historically-opposed political positions into a different and future-oriented concept. It is not so long ago, for example, that the notion of environmental protection and economic growth were considered to be mutually exclusive by some, and only recently that a broad consensus has been created around the reconciliation of the two into Sustainable Development.*¹²

Even as the vocabulary of Sustainable Development struggles to reconcile many of these hitherto competing positions, in most arenas of life there still remain two distinct constellations of ideas and issues which cluster at the opposite poles of the concept of 'the environment'.

First, there is the set of large geo-political issues to do with climate change, the loss of biodiversity across the world, the depletion of many of the world's non-renewable natural resources and large scale environmental despoliation. This is a world dominated by large NGOs, scientific bodies, multinational corporations, national and international politicians, dominated by male experts trading statistics and competing global scenarios. This is 'big picture' politics, conducted on the international stage, and to which nation-states are willing or reluctant signatories. These

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issues rarely make the front pages of the broadsheets, and hardly get a mention in the tabloids, even though their implications are enormous and far-reaching. National politics is rarely fought over the detail of such international commitments.

Second, at the other end of the telescope, there is that passionate concern with 'the environment' of the street and neighbourhood, which persistently emerges in the opinion polls, where issues of litter, graffiti, street crime, traffic noise and density, and poorly maintained utilities and public services figure prominently and repeatedly. Such local issues are beginning to gain national attention because, as the Urban Task Force report shows, these are the reasons why so many people are in flight from the cities.¹³ These concerns are often most strongly articulated by women - particularly women with families - who also play the larger part in local neighbourhood amenity and 'environmental' campaigns. The role played by women in neighbourhood regeneration is a specific theme emphasised in the recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, *Joined Up Places?* for example.¹⁴

It is tempting to see these as separate political worlds, one the province of national and international politicians and experts, the other the province of local councillors and neighbourhood voluntary organisations - and that it is a matter of

chance or contingency that they happen to take on such distinct gender patterns. But of course they are not separate. They are deeply interconnected.

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likely to start in the home, the street and the neighbourhood than they are at the international conference table. Look after the environmental pennies, it could be argued, and the sustainable pounds may end up looking after themselves. If political parties - and environmentalists - continue to delude themselves that the ‘local’ parish-pump issues of litter, broken pavements, vandalised and unstaffed railway stations are not environmental issues in the very deepest sense, then they could be making one of the most serious political errors of a generation.

Many roads to environmental well-being

Many politicians continue to believe that environmental issues are the concern or prerogative of a particular party - the Green Party - and are therefore party-specific and highly territorialised. While the Green Party may be focused on environmental issues, it is largely because the other parties have ignored them for so long. Yet all the major political traditions in Britain have strong roots in ecological and even ruralist concerns and affinities. Whether it is the language of ‘the common wealth’ or of ‘stewardship’, few political or religious discourses avoid any reference

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to the importance of living in harmony with the earth and its natural splendour and fecundity - something to be shared by all.

All political traditions, then, already possess some of the intellectual resources with which to embrace a more environmentally conscious politics. As the Liberal Democrats have already discovered, close attention to the minutiae of local worries about litter, broken street lighting, and low levels of public care and maintenance have in recent years led their march towards power in local government elections. They have reaped the political rewards of taking people’s local environmental apprehensions seriously. In the next section a number of other connections between environmentalism and wider quality of life issues are explored, demonstrating that an environmental perspective can add considerable value to the achievement of other political goals.

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poor people, poor environments

Poor people, and disadvantaged communities, often get penalised twice. Not only do they have to live with fewer economic resources, they often - indeed almost always - live in environments which exact an additional toll on their well-being, through being unhealthier, less accessible, and literally more expensive places in which to survive. The poor are more likely to live on inner city estates where overcrowding, high traffic densities, and lack of amenities are more common. They may live in deprived industrial areas where jobs have disappeared, and the industries which once supported them have left a legacy of contamination and blight.¹⁵ High incidences of cancer and other serious systemic health problems attached to specific localities are often hushed up or regarded as exceptional aberrations, despite the trend toward 'democratising' these kinds of environmental risks.

The poor are more likely to live in areas with "two to three times the level of poor housing, vandalism and dereliction."¹⁶ In such neighbourhoods, children and adults have greater difficulty in getting to shops that sell fresh food, or to supermarkets where prices are cheaper than in

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small neighbourhood shops. Poor transport links only heighten their sense of exclusion.¹⁷ The decline of cheap public transport has been a particular blow to the poorest sections of the community, denying them opportunities to seek work elsewhere, or other kinds of engagement with the wider society. Inadequate and expensive public transport services have left many poorer communities in both rural and urban areas isolated and sequestered.

The housing that poor people live in is likely to be poorly insulated and less well maintained, leading to greater energy consumption, and the higher fuels bills which accompany it. Those who have cars are likely to own older vehicles which are less fuel-efficient, and frequently need repairing.¹⁸ In these circumstances, Diane Warburton has argued, "poverty and environmental degradation are symptoms of the weaknesses of the overall economic and political system," which traps such communities in a double-bind of decreasing expectations and powerlessness.¹⁹

A badly maintained environment compounds the negative image of such places. As Forrest and Kearns note,

Young people in the Liverpool neighbourhoods were clear that the negative external image of the area was largely perpetuated by a poor physical environment: 'People who come down here don't see it as a nice place ... they only see the shit we live in.' Liverpool residents wanted comprehensive improvement in the housing and environment in order to change their neighbourhoods' image. In talking about empty houses in disrepair, they said: 'If they did all the houses. Yeah, make it look pretty... people aren't afraid of pretty things'.²⁰

"If poverty often penalises people twice, once economically, and then environmentally, the ways in which poor environments can be improved can deliver double dividends."

all the improvements, then while the physical environment may look better, the social environment will remain untouched, possibly even further undermined. After the Broadwater Farm riots, precipitated partly by high levels of unemployment and alienation from the local political process, the use of outside contractors to repair the damage caused further anger and bitterness. Since then, the estate has been refurbished and is now maintained by an on-site Estate Services Manager, using the paid services of local residents, and the result is a much improved

likewise, deliver a double dividend. However, this is dependent upon the processes of environmental improvement and renewal. If outsiders are brought in to make

environment with a greater degree of local pride and local control.²¹

Maintenance is the key to quality and sustainability

British architecture is currently enjoying global prestige, and, as a result of lottery funding, glamorous new capital projects are shooting up everywhere in Britain. But while the British may be good at building things, their reputation for maintaining them is abysmal. Maintenance is the key to both social and environmental sustainability. Developing forms of local maintenance and management, and thus stimulating the local economy, is as important as the physical regeneration itself - it is much more likely to be sustainable in the long term. It also provides much stronger and more immediate feedback mechanisms, when things go wrong or quality starts to slip.

A large scale review of urban regeneration programmes published in 1994 concluded that too much attention had been given to capital building projects, and too little investment made in people and their activities.²² Yet this lesson has been a hard one for many local authorities to learn. Some are still wedded to a highly centralised 'direct labour' approach to maintenance and repair work (five different work-chits to be completed in order to get a leaking tap

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fixed). Others insist that all such work be put out to tender and that the lowest price wins - and when the contractor goes bust as a result of underpricing, the job is left uncompleted. Neither approach greatly encourages a strong sense of local ownership of the management and maintenance programme, or pride in the work done. Tenants and residents, with training if necessary, are more

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likely to do a decent job looking after their environment than outside contractors who come and go.

Politicians should start to think seriously about regarding the provision of a good quality physical environment as a public service, upon which so many other services depend. If the streets look vandalised or poorly maintained, people are less inclined to walk in them, and may give up going to the park, or letting their children walk to school, or using public transport. A safe, secure and well maintained public realm underpins so much that is valuable in civic life. Yet public finances have got into a pattern whereby savings are always made on revenue (maintenance) costs until things turn into a crisis. Then, once again, capital spending can be used to get things back on track for a while, until the next crisis occurs. Capital spending is regarded as investment, whereas revenue spending is regarded as a cost. This is short-termism gone mad, as we can see from large modern public housing estates which have had to be demolished because poor maintenance allowed them to deteriorate within a few years.

In such cases, the long term sustainability of minimal maintenance regimes is never taken into account. In these situations, ‘sustainability’ as a key principle of social cohesion demonstrates its power and utility, a lesson which the experience and success of Groundwork in its environmental improvement programmes has demonstrated on many occasions. The processes by which communities regain control of their environment are as important as the physical improvements.

Poor environments and political powerlessness

All political parties are rightly concerned with the increasing public indifference or even hostility to mainstream political processes. This can be seen in the declining numbers of people turning out to vote, whether in local or national elections. A recent study of voting patterns in Europe showed that in sub-national elections, Denmark still managed an 80 per cent turnout, Germany 72 per cent, France 68 per cent, Portugal 60 per cent, and the Netherlands 54 per cent, while the UK was bottom of the list with 40 per cent.²³ In the 1998 local elections, one Liverpool ward recorded a nine per cent turnout. In the Tottenham parliamentary by-election of June 2000, there was just a 25 per cent poll. Low electoral turnout, low recycling rates: could there possibly be a connection?

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The poorer people are, and the less control they feel they have over their lives and their environments, the less likely they are to participate in the political process. A study for Charter 88, *The Roots of Democratic Exclusion*, noted that:

Problems of exclusion are compounded by locality. Those groups of people who are most marginalised tend to be concentrated in certain areas: either in deprived inner city districts or isolated housing estates on the edge of major conurbations. The latter, in particular, often lack the basic infrastructure and facilities for the enjoyment of a fulfilling community life.²⁴

To their credit, the Government's substantial commitment of resources to tackling the issue of social exclusion is unlikely to reap any immediate political rewards. Credit is also due to the work of the Social Exclusion Unit in demonstrating how linked the issues of poverty, powerlessness, and democratic exclusion are.

A lot of this powerlessness and rejection is cloaked by superficial forms of local auditing and governance. Many local authorities commission market research into satisfaction with local services, and councillors pride - or possibly delude - themselves by citing satisfaction rates of 80 per cent, when to the independent observer these services often seem very poor indeed. People may claim to be 'satisfied' with amenities because they are glad enough that they still exist, and worry that

expressing dissatisfaction might provide fuel for further cuts in services. Similarly, how is it possible to be objectively satisfied with a local service if you have not experienced the range in quality of similar services in other local authorities, where they may be spending the same amount of money per capita to achieve double the quality and excellence? Superficial attitudinal market research is an over-inflated currency now being used to evaluate local need and concern. More participatory forms of auditing are badly needed, giving users of amenities greater say in their delivery and chosen outcomes.

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Ian Christie also sees the problem of engaging and involving populations as a key weakness. In exploring the links between the present Government's modernisation agenda, and the possibilities offered by environmental improvement and sustainable development policies, he concludes that "Both perspectives share the diagnosis that central and local government have fundamentally lost the trust of their people. They are much too distant from ordinary citizens." In supporting the principle of 'joined-up thinking' and greater cross-departmental implementation of policies, he argues:

The whole-system approach is something we should be able to apply to both the modernisation agenda as well as to sustainable development. The need to revitalise local democracy is also at the core of both processes, calling as they do for nothing

less than a renaissance of civic bonds between local citizens and governments.”²⁵

But while governments endeavour to address issues of poverty through individual and family benefits, through training programmes and educational initiatives, it is the placelessness of many of these programmes that undermines their power to strengthen communities and their capacity for self-organisation. The Social Exclusion Unit’s Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal could be crucial here.²⁶

Sustainable development seems to offer a way of combining environmental issues with social

ones. Anna Dodd of Leicester City Council notes that “Since the early 1990s, we’ve moved a long way from the ‘green circle’ to the integration of environmental issues with economic and social ones. Instead of ‘green strategies’ we are now working to ensure that sustainable development underpins key work in all areas.”²⁷ Developing new forms of democracy and citizenship through environmental regeneration is an issue that will be explored more fully later in this paper. Before that, another way of seeing the crucial link between the quality of the local physical environment and the possibilities of social renewal is through the renewed interest in both the problems and opportunities represented by ‘the public realm’.

renewing the public realm

The quality of ‘the public realm’ is a keynote of the Urban Task Force report, which calls for local ‘public realm strategies’, to create a stronger sense of identity and quality for urban settings and environments. For the purposes of the Urban Task Force report, the public realm principally describes the condition and safety of pavements, streets, public spaces, parks, bus shelters, railway stations, and public buildings and amenities, which people use on a daily basis. In short, the built environment.²⁸

This is not just an issue for the inner city or major conurbation; even the suburbs are beginning to look blighted in many parts of Britain. The continued vitality of the suburbs has recently been called into question by the report *Sustainable renewal of suburban areas*, which notes the extensive deterioration of many suburban areas where there is a loss of ‘sense of belonging’, insufficient and poorly accessible shops, a high consumption of land and energy, high car dependence, and ugliness of sprawl with unsafe and neglected public spaces.²⁹ Once again, then, the poor quality of the physical environment is seen as a symptom of larger ills in the body politic.

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Decline in the public realm is most graphically illustrated through its physical manifestations: boarded up and vandalised suburban railway stations, run-down parks with burnt-out pavilions, broken pavements, unattended and uncompleted utilities works, pot-holed and poorly-maintained roads, graffiti-scrawled walls, shops with iron grilles and shutters, poorly maintained municipal libraries and sports facilities, and so on. Physical dereliction is not simply an eyesore: it produces in vulnerable groups, particularly women, a sense of insecurity and danger. Therefore in a positive sense, repair of the physical fabric is a pre-condition of the repair of the social and civic fabric too.

But the public realm is also a relational realm, a place where different kinds of social relations develop, quite distinct from those of family or institutional life. Strangers talk to each other on park benches, ask for directions, enjoy being one of the crowd, and assume for the most part the goodwill and trust of others. The kindness of strangers is a phrase that is coming to haunt modern political discourses, as we appreciate just how much society is maintained by the invisible webs of public trust which bind people together and which if broken down - through ethnic or

religious enmity and suspicion, or forms of communitarian distrust and even violence - can have disastrous results.

The 'rules of engagement' of public life and behaviour need re-invigorating from time to time, and from place to place. It is here that environmentalism is emerging as a significant new source of beliefs and actions about the need for new kinds of citizenship. It emphasises that one individual's environmental pollution affects everybody, and that the externalities of private choices can impact badly upon the wider public good. The focus on public goods - those collective benefits which accrue when people co-operate to provide amenities and environments which individuals alone cannot provide, and indeed can individually harm - is shared by many social policy analysts and environmentalists alike.

Environmentalists emphasise the fact that the actions of just one individual or company can spoil

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the environment for the many - think of fly-tipping, or the pollution of a river by a single company. The public realm advocates make the same point about social behaviour too. In fact they often combine. Just as one person riding a jet-ski close to a crowded beach can spoil the pleasures of the many, so too can the actions of a single individual make life unpleasant, even unliveable, on a small estate, or in a park. In this and many other senses

environmental regeneration and social regeneration go hand in hand, and can be promoted and developed as a joint project.

Environmental regeneration could be the key to social regeneration

This is certainly the case made in a recent report for Groundwork, where Ian Christie argues that environmental regeneration could play the key role in programmes of social renewal:

Groundwork's experience underlines how working with deprived communities, especially through young people and schools, can help turn disadvantage into potential and real hope for a better future. There is overwhelming evidence that environmental improvement projects can be used to do much more than making a greener, more ecologically sustainable and responsible community. They can help improve learning, promote better health, create jobs and skills, and boost people's confidence and ability to make a difference to their prospects and to their community. They can also help reconnect excluded people to the mainstream by improving the physical connections between their place and others - through a focus on better public transport access, safer pedestrian and cycle routes, and better open spaces.³⁰

The success of Groundwork, which has grown from one local organisation in 1981 to a network of over 40 Trusts with a national turnover of £42 million in 1998, has been achieved in some of the most difficult circumstances. Harsh and blighted environments have been refurbished, landscaped and given a new life, but this has been achieved by working closely in partnership with the communities involved.

The many Groundwork Trusts have pioneered new forms of public consultation with residents and tenants, developing locally specific ways of moving forward together in the renewal and improvement of neighbourhoods and estate environments. This concern with procedure and consultation takes Groundwork, and other environmental projects, directly into the territory of democratic renewal. The excellent handbook produced by Hackney Groundwork, *Changing Estates*,³¹ is a model guide to canvassing local opinion, holding meetings and creating other opportunities for people to express their opinions, and in many other ways forming new local networks for participation, debate and consensus-seeking. Many local authorities - and national political parties - could learn a great deal from it.

But this kind of work is also about the creation of jobs - meaningful jobs which provide paid work whilst directly improving the quality of life in the local community. Local employment schemes based on restoring the local public fabric - housing, streets, parks - provide work as well as increasing local social cohesion. The greater labour productivity of the weightless economy, coupled with the low esteem with which economists regard public spending, has taken away many jobs that people once did which provided employment whilst fulfilling a valuable social function in the community: railway station staff, bus conductors, housing caretakers, street-cleaners, park-keepers, school catering staff. There may have been short-

term financial gains in squeezing these jobs out of the system, but there were also enormous social and environmental losses further down the line. Environmentalism's concern with resource productivity, rather than labour productivity, has real job-creating potential once again in these neighbourhood based environmental services.

The potential for job creation through environmental regeneration, particularly new forms of energy and resource efficiency, recycling, waste management, and developing greener local economies, is a point which has been made with increasing resonance by the economist Robin Murray. He and colleagues estimate that "an intensive programme of recycling in the UK could create between 40,000 and 55,000 new jobs, taking into account those that would be lost in the process."³²

These are jobs which often provide a multiple dividend. They provide work directly in the communities which adopt extensive recycling programmes; many adopt the form of self-managed community enterprises; they are environmentally friendly; and they can help strengthen the social networks of the street and neighbourhood as well. A quadruple dividend in fact. Recycling actively depends on the involvement of all householders in the primary stages of the process, and can set the ground rules for what Murray calls a 'productive democracy', in which

“Environmental organisations themselves need to learn from the experience and skills of the community development sector.”

people take greater responsibility for their role in protecting the community's environment.

These kinds of schemes also create a positive climate for change, a sense of actively making things better, which a more consumerist 'culture of complaint' has attenuated. The renewal of democracy is likely to be strongly dependent on capturing the public's imagination and active support for the environmental agenda, for in the words of Ian Christie, "no other source of civic energy is plausible for the task."³³

In turn, though, environmental organisations themselves need to learn from the experience and skills of the community development sector. A new report from the Community Development Foundation on the links between tackling poverty and environmental action makes this point explicitly. It provides a number of case studies which demonstrate the skills and patience sometimes needed to develop such projects, which are much more likely to succeed if a 'learning process' approach is adopted. This is again a link to the educational and developmental roles which local environmental initiatives need to harness.³⁴

"Although we live in an increasingly diverse and complex society, environmentalism could provide a common set of core activities and aspirations to help tie individuals and communities together."

Finally, one returns to the growing connection between environmentalism and citizenship, and the debate about rights and responsibilities in a culturally diverse, politically volatile culture. New political discourses struggle to respect wide differences of lifestyle, culture, religion and political views, while at the same time urging that there are public procedures, values and common goods which need to be respected, if the social fabric is not to be rendered into pieces. It is precisely here that the vocabularies and practices of environmentalism and sustainability come into their own, even producing what Andrew Dobson, among others, has termed 'Environmental Citizenship'.

Environmental citizenship does not only consist in agitating for better recycling facilities, but in recycling at home. Old-style citizenship was about the square and the town hall, the public face of production and consumption. Environmental citizenship emphasises the links between the public and the private and recognises that every 'private' environmental action has a public environmental consequence.³⁵

Although we live in an increasingly diverse and complex society, environmentalism could provide a common set of core activities and aspirations to help tie individuals and communities together.

taking action

In outlining the role that environmental policies and initiatives can play in addressing social issues, as well as the role environmental action can play in developing new forms of citizenship and democracy, this pamphlet provides a starting point for a wider political debate. What follows is a set of principles that show how this thinking can be applied in practice. Examples are provided of schemes which successfully straddle social and environmental policies, to promote quality of life in its widest sense.

Walkability is a key principle of neighbourhood renewal.

For people to feel a strong sense of local ownership of space, and pride in their neighbourhood, it has to be physically and psychologically under control. This means that it has to be safely walkable. The report *A Safer Journey to School* details how encouraging children to walk to school through wardened schemes cuts down on local car traffic and emissions, gets parents working together to provide safe escorts, and gives children a healthier start to the day, as well as a greater awareness of their local neighbourhood.³⁶ Green Transport Plans (and School Travel Plans) do this too. Walking is both the most sociable and the most environmentally beneficial way of reclaiming the local neighbourhood. Likewise, there is little point

in investing in local environmental improvement schemes, and the provision of new facilities and amenities, if the streets used to access them are still felt to be dangerous and unsafe. An accessible and enjoyable neighbourhood is only as strong as its weakest links - the streets connecting it. Transport and regeneration policies which fail to give full recognition to the basic importance of walking are simply not sustainable. Put 'pedestrian planning' at the heart of transport policy.

Meet local needs locally.

Local services should wherever possible be provided by local people and local businesses. Maintenance work, care-taking, street-cleaning, park-keeping, and other important service jobs are likely to be done to a higher quality, and with a greater degree of local knowledge and watchfulness, if they are done by local people. It helps cut down on transport costs too. If neighbourhood renewal is to be more than top-down managerialism, it has to give clear thought to how the delivery mechanisms and agencies for local services can be provided locally, and how they

“Walking is both the most sociable and the most environmentally beneficial way of reclaiming the local neighbourhood.”

strengthen the local economy and exchange of goods and services. Community transport schemes and community recycling schemes have both been successful in providing services, jobs and local networks of knowledge and sociability. Dial-A-Ride drivers, for example, nearly always know the names of their elderly passengers, exactly where they need to be collected and dropped off, and what assistance they need to do so safely.

Maintenance and management are key factors for social and environmental sustainability.

Britain's towns and cities are full of districts, housing estates, streets and parks which are failing principally through lack of adequate maintenance. New capital spending programmes should demonstrate a sustainable maintenance programme and identify the funding for this. If there is to be greater local management and maintenance of the everyday environment, then thought must be given to developing neighbourhood management skills and capacities. A new generation of caretakers, park-keepers, concierges and civic wardens will need greater inter-personal and conciliation skills, as well as practical abilities. As local democracy is renewed through environmental action, conflicting interests will need to be addressed and negotiated more locally and directly.

Maximise use of facilities and resources.

All buildings cost money and resources to heat and maintain, irrespective of whether they are being used or not. Greater use should be made of school buildings, public libraries and other facilities in order to maximise use and value from

their capital and revenue costs. Multiple use also offers opportunities for strengthening community networks, even where allegedly incompatible uses become the focus for debate and negotiation. Schools and community facilities which rely on high fences, CCTV cameras and other security systems for protection are likely to mean that social and environmental sustainability is not even on the agenda.

Only support projects which are based on learning processes and self-renewability.

Too many regeneration projects are still developed by politicians and professionals, who may move on to greener pastures once the initial spending is complete, or the problems start to show. Environmentalism has always stressed the self-correcting, self-renewing aspects of ecological processes, and the crucial importance of the learning processes which environmental projects support and foster. Regeneration projects should always demonstrate the learning opportunities inherent in them, their long-term revenue and management implications, and point to clear hand-over processes for the professionals involved. In many places elected local authorities and their staff still fulfil many of these long-term criteria well, but elsewhere, local authorities and other public agencies have seriously impeded the growth of newer forms of local decision-making and responsibility.

“Regeneration projects should always demonstrate the learning opportunities inherent in them.”

Localise and democratise the evaluation process.

Too many public sector professionals claim that more and more time is spent on responding to top-down auditing processes: quotas achieved, performance indicators scored, units processed - even though some performance indicators produce 'perverse effects' which run counter to the original intentions. Likewise, bland market research into satisfaction rates for local services lack insight or credibility. New ways of evaluating the success of local provision should be developed, based on greater community involvement in establishing benchmarks and achievements. Such forms of auditing should be linked to new community planning processes.

Explore new forms of ownership and governance.

One of the most significant aspects of the Countryside Agency's 'Millennium Greens' project is that it requires a transfer of land assets into community trusts. The transfer of assets is always a strong signal of seriousness about 'ownership' and responsibility. Many environmental reclamation projects demonstrated an early alertness to issues of ownership and management. Much of Groundwork's work has been about creating local bodies to undertake local reclamation projects, again including establishing new local 'commons'. City farms, community gardens, projects such as 'Growing Communities' which turns derelict land into sites for growing organic produce, often achieve a social objective and an environmental objective at the same time. The Development Trusts Association provides a good example of how communities create new democratic forms of

ownership and management to achieve social and environmental goals.

Use technology and intelligence to increase resource-productivity and labour intensity.

New technology should not be used to replace human skills and jobs, but to enhance community. Vending machines and ticket machines in unstaffed railway stations and local amenities displace human contact, security and sociability. Local cable television and local websites have both been used successfully to keep people informed of local issues, inviting people to meetings which are also broadcast live. Real time information systems at bus stops and railway stations reassure people that indeed their bus or train is coming. Email networks can provide up to date information about job opportunities, local housing lettings and sales, volunteering opportunities, car-sharing schemes and local meetings or gatherings. They can also provide the crucial feedback mechanisms that sensitive policy development and action programmes need.

"Local cable television and websites have both been used successfully to keep people informed of local issues."

Use energy-efficiency programmes, and similar schemes such as local recycling initiatives, to create jobs and get a better deal for poorer people.

The Glasgow WISE scheme, creating a double dividend of cheaper fuel bills for people whose houses were insulated, as well as providing jobs for unemployed people locally to undertake the survey

and insulating work, is a clear example of how social and environmental objectives can be achieved.³⁷ The government's new £260 million Home Energy Efficiency Scheme, designed to provide more than a quarter of a million over-60s households with advice and grants to improve insulating and reduce fuel bills, is a start.

Ensure that the connections between local and national, micro and macro systems, are clear and working.

Neighbourhoods themselves are part of wider connections, although the neighbourhood is usually the first place in which these connections are experienced directly. Some politicians are rightly concerned that it would be counter-productive to launch enthusiastically into community recycling schemes, if the long term outcomes and possibilities of success are not fully explored. Why, they ask, sort newspapers, glass and organics on the doorstep if they may all end up tumbled together again in a landfill site because the collecting agency was unable to find a market for them? The success of local environmental schemes

will be inter-related with developments elsewhere, and new political forms will need to be developed to strengthen the web of local initiatives and make them part of a wider, connecting whole.

Conclusions

The environmentalist's concern for processes as much as products, which is also the concern of those engaged in social policy, needs to ensure that the new forms of community-building it proposes are robust and efficient. That said, there have been more successes in community development in recent years through environmentally-based projects than there have been through large scale capital spending programmes or schemes which favour professional and managerial solutions. For in the end, councils and governments change hands, and professionals move on. But most people carry on living where they do, and the long term sustainability of social and environmental regeneration depends on communities learning to manage change - in all its complexity - for themselves.

“It’s just about getting on with life. People want to see real action: not the complicated language of environmentalism, but practical steps to make their communities a safer, cleaner and better place to live.”

Response by Hazel Blears MP

In Our Backyard highlights the need for a completely new approach to environmental politics, and my personal experience since the general election shows how important this will be in tackling social exclusion.

‘Making it better’ - that’s the headline promise of our project in one of Salford’s most deprived inner city neighbourhoods. Maybe that’s because things could hardly get worse. Over the last 10 years local people have watched in horror whilst their community has almost dissolved around them. Crime, vandalism and anti-social behaviour have escalated out of control. Many of the small terraced properties are boarded up, derelict or have been torched and robbed of anything valuable inside. Children as young as five years old roam the street with teenagers, often on the fringes and sometimes at the centre of criminal activity.

Rising unemployment in the early nineties, the breakdown of family life and more specifically an invasion of irresponsible tenants, encouraged by private landlords simply seeking to make a quick profit, have devastated this once proud and respectable neighbourhood.

Many of the programmes enacted by successive Governments to tackle ‘inner city problems’ concentrated almost exclusively on bricks and mortar solutions. Millions of pounds were spent on ‘environmental measures’ like tree planting, beautiful railings, traffic calming measures, renewing pavements and undertaking external and internal repairs to rows of terraced houses.

What was crucially lacking in those early regeneration projects was any attempt to address the underlying, creeping paralysis caused by unemployment, poverty and the breakdown of family life.

“Things could hardly get worse. Over the last 10 years local people have watched in horror whilst their community has almost dissolved around them.”

This Labour Government has finally recognised that for regeneration to be sustainable we must build the confidence of local people so that they are able to take control of their own lives and ensure that improvements continue when the professionals and the Council withdraw.

As Ken Worpole emphasises, poorer neighbourhoods are often seen to be communities of least resistance. Local people not only face the

problems of low incomes but also have to suffer many activities that no one else will tolerate.

If there is an incinerator to be built, a toxic waste plant to be operated, extra traffic to be accommodated or even drugs and alcohol rehabilitation units, guess where they are most

“Poor environments lead to cynicism and disaffection with the political process.”

likely to be built. Not in the affluent suburbs, where the articulate middle class would soon establish an action group and win the day, but in those

neighbourhoods where local people are not well organised, have little access to resources, and lack advocates for their cause.

Involving local people in planning is fundamental to success. We have used new technology in our regeneration area, including virtual reality models, which allow people to experience design schemes for housing, parks, roads and so on, and to change their view of the world at the touch of a button. The creation of 3D models, and ‘planning for real’ exercises with schools and young people, have been tremendously successful, and will help shape the future of their neighbourhood.

The pamphlet highlights the need to integrate learning with regeneration. This is key to long term success. All too often, we expect local people, often on low incomes with a myriad of other responsibilities, to take on complex tasks of public consultation and participation. We want them to help plan multi-million pound projects, monitor

expenditure and be accountable to their friends and neighbours, without training and without practical help. We must establish proper systems of support for volunteers, including travel expenses, childcare, help with elderly relatives, and proper training. Local people should work alongside existing regeneration staff in the form of apprenticeships, so that they are in a position to manage the projects themselves and sustain improvements over the longer term.

New forms of ownership and governance are the foundations of long term change. We are setting up a community housing company where local people will decide on letting policies, repairs, maintenance and improvements to their homes. We are also establishing a community-based financial institution, to offer loans where banks and building societies have withdrawn, which will facilitate the establishment and growth of vibrant community businesses to provide jobs and opportunities for local people.

We are also exploring the idea of a community development trust, so that when the regeneration project has come and gone there are mechanisms within the neighbourhood to draw in further investment to continue to make improvements in years to come.

“The regeneration of communities depends on the shared conviction that we all have a right to live in a decent community.”

Poor environments lead to cynicism and disaffection with the political process. The

reorganisation of local government into cabinet structures and community based committees may, if we are not careful, marginalise political parties even further. Unless party organisation is seen to be in touch with the new structures at neighbourhood level, their contribution will become ever more irrelevant. Labour in the 21st century must be firmly based in the community, seen as a relevant vehicle for change and be the authentic voice of local people.

The introduction of local policy forums, question and answer sessions for local councillors, new candidates for local Government, and the wider involvement of communities in self management and self governance can all help to renew our democratic politics. Without this kind of radical action, party politics will become increasingly irrelevant to the concerns of local people, and will not mobilise support at local or national level.

The regeneration of communities depends on the shared conviction that we all have a right to live in a decent environment wherever we are, countryside or city, suburb or town. Equally, we all have responsibilities towards one another, to pick up our litter, to control our dogs, and children, to play a part in what goes on in our neighbourhood and to look out for one another and keep our communities safe.

It sounds idyllic, but actually it's just about getting on with life. People want to see real action: not the complicated language of environmentalism, but practical steps to make their communities and the country as a whole a safer, cleaner and better place to live.

By accepting many of the approaches outlined in this pamphlet, Labour, too, can ensure that it has a long and sustainable future.

Hazel Blears is Labour MP for Salford.

“People in degraded environments need power and funding so that they can have a pivotal role in planning and implementing improvement schemes.”

Response by Don Foster MP

Liberal Democrats everywhere should give a warm welcome to *In Our Backyard*. It highlights the crucial link between our environment and our sense of social well-being.

I asked Charles Kennedy to add ‘social justice’ to my DETR brief, partly because I believe we can help end social exclusion through community action on the environment. *In Our Backyard* is in spirit with our fundamental belief that politics works best when local people have true ownership of projects through their own involvement right from the beginning.

The ghettos of the poor in our country are often unhealthy places, with housing poorly insulated and costly to heat, without good public transport, and with their children at greater risk from road deaths and pollution. Their ‘sink’ schools find it hard to attract good teachers. Small corner-street shops don’t have the bargains offered by distant supermarkets. Loans come from loan sharks at extortionate interest. Banks are long gone. Those who live in such places lack the skills and resources to regenerate them.

The Labour government deserves credit for its good intentions in setting up regeneration projects,

but hundreds of overlapping schemes weighed down with bureaucracy are leading to muddle and chaos.

People in degraded environments need power and funding so that they can have a pivotal role in planning and implementing improvement schemes. This must mean much more than just consulting them about a variety of options dictated ‘from the top’.

Decentralised decision-making, much closer to communities, is a core Liberal Democrat principle, which is why the local authorities we control, such as Eastleigh, were early pioneers of the area committee system. We want to see an enhanced role for parish councils where they are supported by their local communities in taking on extended powers. We would develop local community councils within all urban areas, too.

The same principle can be seen on a grander scale in our long-standing commitment to regional government. We want powers stripped away from Whitehall and Westminster, from their ‘out-stations’ the Regional Development Agencies, and from other unelected quangos, and given to democratically-elected regional governments.

Communal decision-making can make a difference. Two years ago I saw infant schools in the Canton of Zurich in Switzerland, where young children could walk home safely and unattended by adults because the local community had agreed that no-one would drive cars in the streets around the school at 'home time' and because adults watched out for the children, both on the pavements and from the windows of their homes.

"Local Agenda 21 has been the focus for some innovative community projects, but it has not been as successful as many hoped."

I notice that Ken Worpole makes no mention of Local Agenda 21, which came out of the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 and recognised the interdependence of sustainable development and local community action, producing the slogan 'think global, act local'. This was an attempt to do just what the pamphlet suggests.

In some areas Local Agenda 21 has been the focus for some innovative community projects, but it has not been as successful as many hoped. We've lacked leadership and sense of purpose from central government. It is vital that communities use shared information about successful initiatives and best practice, through intelligent use of information technology. Central government has to work *with* local communities on environmental issues, not just pass the buck to them.

However, we can celebrate Liberal Democrat successes with such local initiatives. The London

Borough of Sutton, Liberal Democrat-controlled for many years, has developed a series of projects involving the community on environmental issues.

Two particularly impressed me. The Peabody/BioRegional Beddington Zero Energy Development is probably Europe's largest eco-village development. It is a zero-energy housing project where householders will generate their own power from waste and other sustainable sources. Local people are developing the project, with the Council as facilitator. Additionally, there is to be a community car pool avoiding the need for each household to purchase their own vehicle.

The Beanstalk project helps groups of children to grow their own organic food on otherwise unused allotment sites in Sutton. 16 groups took part in 1999. Children learn from experienced local gardeners what makes good food, and how to care for their environment.

Creativity can come to be much more satisfying than vandalism; ownership is empowering. Even working on my own garden over the summer has reminded me of the satisfaction you get through regenerating previously derelict land.

If our schools could be turned into true 'community schools', we could put a valuable and powerful resource into the hands of local people. In addition to 'Beanstalk'-style projects, children

"Central government has to work *with* local communities on environmental issues, not just pass the buck to them."

could use home economics rooms to learn how to cook the food they'd grown. Library, drama, music and sports hall facilities could all become a community resource. Education authorities need the courage to bring community groups into the local management of schools alongside governors and teachers, so that schools can be open in the evenings, at weekends and in school holidays.

There is everything to be said for developing school sites into flagships of 'green' projects. How many schools have solar heating panels or high-grade insulation? Why can't they have on-site processing of waste and composting? Courses for adult learners could give them the skills to renew their own environment. Community enterprises creating jobs and profits could work out of school sites.

Other community facilities have this potential too. There are possible multiple uses for libraries, community halls, youth clubs, day centres and post offices.

People should not be campaigning for better local services; they should be running them.

Liberal Democrats believe that by 'trusting the people' community by community, we can generate ideas and jobs, regenerate local economies, reduce social exclusion and enhance the environment.

"People should not be campaigning for better local services; they should be running them."

In Our Backyard sings from the same hymn-sheet in highlighting the difference that local action can make to a community's environment, but overlooks the importance of marrying local activism to a strong central philosophy about sustainable development. Without political leadership from national government on the big environmental issues, the importance of community action on local ones will not be recognised.

Don Foster is Liberal Democrat MP for Bath. He is the party's spokesperson for environment, transport, regions and social justice.

“The double benefit of greater community involvement and an improved locality is key to sustaining a higher quality of life.”

Response by Damian Green MP

Environmentalists engage in fundamental thinking, so let me start with a fundamental question. Do enough people care enough about ‘the environment’ to make it a salient political issue? It may seem a brutal question, but those of us who regard environmental problems as a significant and serious public policy challenge should be able to address it confidently. Ken Worpole makes the point that many people may not feel that the great international issues which dominate the environmentalists’ agenda matter to them, but they still care passionately about their locality-and see that as the key environmental issue that politics should be tackling.

On this basis, every politician should be concerned about the environment, even if the polls show that only around 20 per cent of voters consider it an important issue (a number which in itself is perfectly respectable). Environmental politics must be real life everyday politics, as well as long-term global politics. This is what we have been putting into place with our Conservative ‘Blue-Green Agenda’, setting out how our concern for the environment springs from wider Conservative principles. Many of these arise in the course of Ken Worpole’s pamphlet: the need for

individual responsibility, the likelihood that local loyalties can play a part both in social and environmental improvements, and the attraction of diversity of ownership.

The Blue-Green Agenda starts from the understanding that those of a conservative cast of mind will wish to act as stewards, preserving and enhancing the natural world and the built environment for future generations, just as we do for our institutions. We wish to promote sustainable development through encouraging private and voluntary effort, and creating sensible regulation that harnesses the power of the market. We want to use tax cuts as an incentive to ‘greener’ behaviour, and give more environmental decisions to local communities. We are promoting open debate in a free society, to allow proper discussion of difficult scientific and technological problems. Lastly, we think that the UK should take a lead in urging practical solutions to international problems.

Some of the policies we have already unveiled put these principles into practice, in ways that meet the challenges set out by Ken Worpole. Our document on waste policy, *A Cleaner Greener Britain*,

“Do enough people care enough about ‘the environment’ to make it a salient political issue?”

sets much greater store on recycling than the Government's own waste strategy, and urges a much better focussing of the resources deployed through the Landfill Tax Credit scheme to promote doorstep recycling. We want to see every local authority offering a separate doorstep collection of recyclables. In this way we would engage individuals to change their daily routine in a small but significant way.

We have also been campaigning for tighter planning controls on mobile phone masts,

"A general issue can become a thousand vital local issues, bringing people to the realisation that their local concerns have a wider context."

especially near schools and hospitals. This is an issue that is partly about the environment, and partly about potential health hazards. What it shows is how a general issue can become a thousand

vital local issues, bringing people to the realisation that their local concerns have a wider context.

We have advocated tax incentives for motorists to switch to cleaner fuels. The model here is the tremendous success in the 1980s of the tax-driven switch to lead-free petrol. Transport is clearly a difficult area for environmentalists who reject the notion that greener politics mean reducing personal freedom. What we need to do is disentangle the various traffic problems we face and recognise that the emissions problem is capable of technological resolution over time. What public policy can do is to speed up the move to cleaner fuels, and therefore to that long-term

solution. If the buyers are there, the market to service them will develop quickly.

Similarly, if we wish to use environmental policy to encourage people to become more involved in community affairs, we must be aware of the strong feelings generated by planning matters. Preserving green spaces is emphatically not just a concern of the suburban and rural middle classes. Those who live in the inner cities also value the green space they have, and do not want it either built on or rendered unusable. This is why we have advocated turning the planning system on its head, and allowing local communities a much greater say. At the moment we have a top-down model where the Secretary of State produces a global number of new houses, and then divides it out around the regions and counties like a mediaeval monarch. The result is the potential disappearance of green fields in popular regions, combined with a flight from the inner cities of far too many of the economically active, responding to the Government's signal to go where the new houses are.

Giving real strategic planning power to local councils

will mean that voters have a say about what matters, doing far more to encourage a higher turn out at elections than changing the voting day or moving the polling stations.

"Centralising political decision-making means that good projects do not take root, and good people do not remain involved."

Many of Groundwork's projects illustrate the well of goodwill that can be tapped on the environment in apparently unpromising places. The double benefit of greater community involvement and an improved locality is key to sustaining a higher quality of life. Ken Worpole has kind words for the Community Development Foundation (CDF), and I should declare an interest as a Trustee of this effective charity. What the CDF has learned is that patience and consistency are necessary for improvements to be maintained over time. Such consistency can only come from the bottom up. Centralising political decision-making means that good projects do not take root, and good people do not remain involved.

We will be dealing with a number of other policy issues in the months ahead, from the global challenge of climate change to the protection of our precious natural heritage. We do this because these issues are important in themselves, and because they provide a route into community involvement for so many who might otherwise ignore the political process. Since we believe that responsible individuals are the bedrock of a healthy society, and that publicly involved citizens are the best protection against an over-mighty state, we see only good coming from a greater spread of environmental awareness and activity.

*Damian Green is the Conservative environment spokesman.
He is the MP for Ashford.*

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