



Newlands: a legacy of hope for regeneration?

Seven years into the programme, with over 360ha of brownfield land transformed, the Northwest's Newlands regeneration scheme has proved its ability to deliver. Under the Coalition's new policy framework, future projects are unlikely to see the Government investment Newlands enjoyed, yet the project team says the strategy can be adapted to deliver quality spaces for deprived communities.

Eleanor Sheath reports.

“We are now entering a time when public funds will be scarce, but the issues of deprivation and environmental degradation caused by brownfield land remain to be resolved. Far from being fearful, I think new and perhaps better resourcing solutions will come forward. But we do need to adopt the right, realistic strategy and advocacy.”

Reflecting on the success of the Newlands regeneration scheme, project lead and regional director for the Forestry Commission Keith Jones, is confident the principles and practice underlying the scheme's success can still be applied under the new policy framework. He is not alone.



Reclaiming green space for communities

Launched in the summer of 2003, Newlands is a £59 million scheme reclaiming large areas of derelict, under-used and neglected (DUN) land across England's Northwest.

The Northwest Regional Development Agency (NWDA) and Forestry Commission led the scheme, with a wide local partnership to tackle some of the worst areas of neglected land in the region, transforming them into community woodlands to benefit local economies, communities and environments.

The first phase of the programme, across the Mersey Belt, has now finished with over 360 hectares regenerated across eight sites.

The second phase of the programme has now selected all the sites it will regenerate and is not accepting any more applications.

Of the three sites underway, Brockholes, a large (nearly 180ha) new wetlands and woodlands visitor centre just outside Preston is expected to be opened by Lancashire Wildlife Trust in April 2011.



The two other sites will be evaluated and packaged up as propositions for new LEPs and their respective Local Authorities.

The team then hopes to be able to continue development via an offshoot project called Setting the Scene for Growth. This Mersey and Red Rose Community Forest street greening project will run for the next two years at least, but with reduced funding to finish sites it has started work on.

'Win win win' selection strategy

At the core of the Newlands' strategy is the use of a sophisticated evidence-based selection tool to help strategic decision makers in identifying brownfield land for development that offers the optimum social, economic and environmental benefits.

Known as the Public Benefit Recording System (PBRS), the tool was devised by the Forestry Commission and NWDA and uses Geographic Information System (GIS) software. This allows spatial data from a wide variety of social economic and environmental sources to be combined and analysed in order to ensure that projects achieve what its inventors call a 'win-win-win scenario'.

PBRS is built on the premise that the key to increasing the social, economic and environmental value of an area and exploiting its leverage potential, lies in the three criteria of quality, entrepreneurship and location.

Keith Jones explains: "We used PBRS in conjunction with discussions with the local authorities and NWDA to select sites to achieve the most benefit for communities with the resources we had. In reality we sought to regenerate brownfield land which had little or no economic value and had been causing long term blight."

With PBRS, each site chosen is a high priority for regeneration. It also helps to remove any emotional or political response to a site.

PBRS has since been instrumental in securing public sector approval to a number of high-value environmental regeneration programmes, and Jones suggests it could

be used to boost the financial leverage and impact of future projects across the country.

Rounded return on space

Newlands sites are sustainable and economically 'edged' community woodlands; whole regeneration of these sites stimulates local economy.

Informal research has shown that house prices for those directly abutting Moston Vale have almost trebled since work began there. More conclusive evidence will come in the shape of the Valuation Office Agency reports for each Newlands site.

Many sites were chosen due to their location being adjacent to business and industrial zones. For example, Central Business Park, a designated Strategic Investment Site in the Northwest's Regional Economic Strategy, sits alongside Moston Vale, which provides an environment for investment. Although it is early days, Newlands is monitoring these links to evidence the positive impact that improving

LEFT: Celebrating at Mab Lane, Liverpool.

TOP: Artist John Merril with children at Mab Lane Community Primary School.

“HOUSE PRICES FOR THOSE DIRECTLY ABUTTING MOSTON VALE HAVE ALMOST TREBLED.”

the surroundings of key strategic sites can have on their success.

The sites never sit in isolation. The importance of Green Infrastructure (GI) is always taken into account. Careful planning of access, routes, street trees and open space creates a coherent, joined up network of green spaces across the urban environment. Each site is well linked to other green assets in the area, creating connections between local communities, businesses and other areas of regeneration.

What in many cases was 'no-go' land has been successfully reclaimed for the local community. Anti-social behaviour and low-level crime – such as vandalism, joy riding and illegal motorcycling – have been actively discouraged and prevented by intelligent landscaping and lighting. Through regeneration, Newlands helps to restore pride and encourage community cohesion. Good quality environments encourage people out of their homes and into public spaces where they interact and build social relationships. All the sites provide a place for people to meet, play, and even hold events. For example Brockholes has a 'friends of' group which has invested time and effort in the area and is closely engaged with the process.

Newlands encourages the positive use of land. Healthier living is designed in, by both informal and formal means. Cycle paths, sports equipment and footpaths along with open spaces provide plenty of opportunities for people to get active. Moston Vale has several youth football teams using the site; Bidston Moss has dedicated cycleways that link with the national cycle routes and even Nordki Skiing on its slopes.

Simplicity in engagement

Site surveys are useful but the process of community consultation has been invaluable for Newlands. Partner organisations, including Groundwork, Community Forests Northwest and the Wildlife Trust have built on their existing links with local people to undertake consultation and engagement programmes. Through this, Newlands manages expectations and delivers sites that meet local need.

Richard Topley is the community woodland project manager for the Newlands sites. A forester by trade, he initially came in to help complete the Town Lane Site, a former landfill in Southport Lancashire. He gradually became a full member of the team as his role has extended across all the sites. For him promoting community engagement is crucial but often simple.

"When it comes to attracting people in to the project and the space, some communities are extremely pleased we're there, while for others there may have been anti-social issues

Newlands at a glance

Just some of the sites:

• Town Lane near Birkdale, Merseyside

NWDA has invested £1.78 million in this 26 hectare brownfield land, now transformed into community woodland. There are also cycle routes, pathways and bridges to make it accessible and easy to move around.

• LIVIA, Salford

The new community woodland in Bury forms part of a larger project to create a major community woodland across Salford, Manchester and Bury. This ambitious project is known as LIVIA (Lower Irwell Valley Improvement Area), and has already created 97ha in the Agecroft area of Salford. An additional investment of £4.7m from NWDA enhanced this work connecting the two sites and taking the total number of hectares developed under the LIVIA project to 170ha.

• Mab Lane, West Derby, Liverpool

Mab Lane Community Woodland is a project in the West Derby area of Liverpool that has been turned into an inspiring and multi functional green space, with 20,000 new trees, at the heart of a Liverpool community. The total investment in the project has been £688,272.

• Brockholes, Preston

Brockholes is a varied wetland and woodland site, it spans 166ha and sits next to the M6 motorway near Preston. Even before the Newlands investment was announced, Lancashire Wildlife Trust had commenced work on site. The £8 million NWDA investment now means that work on the site has begun in earnest. As well as the continuing development of the natural areas on the site, there will be major new facilities including a visitor centre which will float on one of the large lakes on site.

on the disused or derelict site in the past.

"There is a reluctance to use the woodland because people don't feel safe. We have to get in there and find out what's intimidating people. We don't need necessarily to cater for these groups specifically, it can be as simple as the team being on site and taking the time to talk to users."

At Bury's LIVIA site, motorbike issues in the past meant a lot of people were unwilling to go there. "The paths were quite narrow and it wasn't a pleasant place to walk," explains Richard. "We've opened up the paths so there are better sight lines and encouraged more people to use the site." He has seen a reduction in the number of motorbikes and fewer problems being reported. "Once people think it's a safe place to go they pass this on."

Staffing has been key to successful community engagement in the Newlands model, Richard believes.

Some sites were given a forest ranger from the start but as the project developed each site was given its own site ranger.

These are employed staff and contact points, with a remit to engage local groups: "Now we have got a solid community ranger structure, we can go in right away and engage with local people."

Another important lesson, he says, is not to raise the expectations of people too high:

"In the past there was a tendency to promise too many flashy things but now we've got back to the core values – a well designed

and flexible site, with trees and open ground in the right proportions and in the right places, easy to access and managed cost effectively in the long term."

Cost-effective design

Stakeholders such as local authorities and local landowners were involved in design from an early stage and spaceshaper events were commissioned by the accountable body to attract a wider cross section of the local community and gain baseline data about sites.

Many of the sites were originally brownfield land with high contamination levels potentially hazardous to human health. The design had to be workable and meet community aspirations, while still protecting the public from harm.

Civil engineer for the project Gemma Eborall, says the results add to existing areas of woodland and "to date the local communities have given us lots of positive feedback – people really appreciate the pathway improvements for example, and often tell us they feel happier using the site, and are more likely to visit more often."

Gemma says in the context of new budget restrictions the range of facilities for future regeneration projects may have to be more subtle and pared down in their design of the woodland environment, but maintains, "the quality of the end product need not suffer."

She adds: "The Forestry Commission skill is in the protection and sustainability of trees and this will continue. In order to make sure

that the woodlands are well developed we will need to look at other opportunities to fund the development of add on features, in terms of private sector sponsorship or local community groups."

Big ask for 'big society'?

Keith Jones suggests using the PBRs evidenced and targeted site selection in future projects will offer strategists opportunities to demonstrate the big society agenda in action.

"The areas we selected for development are areas whose issues will only be addressed via a long-term and integrated community, private and public sector approach. I don't think you can parachute in solutions to instantly address the issues these areas have – they need to be worked at in partnership with the local community over time. The experience on the Newlands sites can provide the 'way-in' or catalyst for other regions."

In an ever-changing economic and political landscape, the model has also adapted. More and more often, new sites are smaller in size and even, in the case of the Setting the Scene for Growth and Green Streets projects, about planting trees in individual streets and neighbourhoods. This, says Keith, is recognition of the value of well-planned and well placed greening, rather than just regeneration on a large scale.

The Newlands scheme is fortunate enough to have a legacy of money from NWDA to continue for the next 20 years. There will be plenty of work done to build on this using existing resources, but can regeneration on any scale happen without significant Government investment?

The answer from Keith is a resounding 'yes'.

He points to a current waste recycling and processing service from Lancashire County Council which is being provided in partnership with Blackpool Council through a Waste Private Finance Agreement with Global Renewables as just one example: "I think this scheme demonstrates what might be done especially in the current financial climate."

Richard Topley agrees that you don't need to throw a lot of money at projects, suggesting instead: "Just teach people who already have the skills how they can use them on their local sites."

Councillor Barbara Murray of Liverpool's Yew Tree Ward has been involved in the Newlands steering group, planning and consultation. She takes Richard's point further, saying: "With severe cuts ahead, policy makers can promise little more than goodwill but projects like the Newlands schemes can continue to flourish with love and attention from the community surrounding them now

there is a structure."

She adds: "Regeneration schemes can survive without funding if we think creatively and encourage local and city wide ownership. We should ask people to come to the woodland to do a bit of work and that effort should be recorded to ensure all the volunteers leave with a sense of pride for what has been achieved."

Barbara is hopeful that if local authorities and development groups think positive then making spaces beautiful "costs nothing but hard work."

Let's hope she's right.

RIGHT: *Newlands project lead Keith Jones is confident the scheme's strategy could still be applied under the new policy framework.*



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