



northwest  
development agency

Our Ref: SRB/  
29<sup>th</sup> March 2004

John Hawkins  
Association of Greater Manchester Authorities  
Wigan Investment Centre  
Waterside Drive  
Off Swann Meadow Road  
Wigan  
WN3 5BA

30 MAR 2004

Dear John

#### Regional Parks Interim Policy Statement

The 1999 Regional Strategy first advanced the concept of creating new regional park resources. These would be *"strategic projects designed to create and manage a range of new regional park resources closer to main centres of population"*. The Regional Economic Strategy highlights the development of regional parks as a key activity. It identifies Sub-Regional Partnerships as leading on *"the development and implementation of a co-ordinated approach to the reclamation of derelict and underused land in and adjacent to urban areas including the development of regional park resources"* (Key Activity 4.4).

Since 1999 the Agency has been in discussion with partners to realise the concept and identify potential projects. Several local partners are currently developing proposals for Regional Park resources and a number of feasibility studies have been undertaken, some financed by the Agency.

To clarify its position, the Agency has prepared an Interim Policy Statement on Regional Parks (attached). This sets out the Agency's position in respect of regional park proposals so that partners have a clear picture of the Agency's policy and intentions. The Interim Policy Statement will be used to inform the Agency's response to the partial review of RPG13. It will also be used when considering funding proposals put forward through Sub-Regional Action Plans.

I trust that the Interim Policy Statement will clarify the Agency's position on this matter.

Yours sincerely,

**Steven Broomhead**  
Chief Executive

# **Regional Parks Interim Policy Statement**

---

February 2004  
Northwest Development Agency



## Regional Parks Interim Policy Statement

### 1 BACKGROUND

The 1999 Regional Strategy advanced the concept of creating new Regional Park resources<sup>1</sup>. These would be "strategic projects designed to create and manage a range of new regional park resources closer to main centres of population". They would not necessarily be large contiguous areas of land and could be based on canal, river or cycle networks. The Regional Economic Strategy identifies the development of Regional Parks as a key activity<sup>2</sup>.

The Policy Statement has been prepared to set out the Agency's position in respect of emerging Regional Park proposals so that partners have a clear picture of the Agency's policy and intentions. The Policy Statement will be used to inform the Agency's response to the partial review of Regional Planning Guidance 13 (RPG) consultation. It will also be used when considering proposals put forward in Sub-Regional Action Plans.

RPG Policy UR12, issued by ODPM in March 2003, requires the North West Regional Assembly (NWRA) and NWDA to agree broad locations for the creation of new and/ or further Regional Park resources, which are accessible to the main centres of population, in the following areas:

- in/around the North West Metropolitan Area;
- along the Region's coast;
- alongside the towns in East Lancashire, and West Cumbria and Furness; and
- adjacent to the key cities and towns identified in Policy SD3.

In order to take this forward the NWDA and NWRA jointly commissioned and funded a research study on Regional Parks in the North West<sup>3</sup>. The Agency has been working with the NWRA to develop the emerging policy framework.

The Partial Review of RPG 13 has now commenced, and the pre-submission consultation draft identifies three strategic "Regional Parks", based on:

- The North West Coast;
- The Mersey Belt; and
- East Lancashire.

The draft policy in the Partial Review is at the informal consultation stage and still advances the 'mega' concept of three strategic Regional Parks covering a large

<sup>1</sup> Action Point E2.6, page 57

<sup>2</sup> Key Activity 4.4, page 27

<sup>3</sup> Regional Park Resources, October 2003, Baker Associates, Countrywise Consultants and Enderby Associates

extent of the region. This has been a fundamental concern of the Agency. The Agency believes that such an approach is unrealistic, undeliverable, and raises expectations which cannot be fulfilled in terms of both human and financial resources.

The Agency has asked for these strategic Regional Parks to be defined as 'areas of search' for Regional Park projects. Within these areas of search, specific Regional Park projects would be identified and brought forward.

## **2 CURRENT AND EMERGING PROPOSALS**

Since 1999 the Agency has been in discussion with partners to realise the concept and identify potential projects. Several local partners are currently developing proposals for Regional Park projects and a number of feasibility studies have been undertaken. In addition a number of broad possibilities have been identified in the Economic and Regenerative Value of the Natural Environment in the North West (ERVNE) Study<sup>4</sup> undertaken on behalf of the Agency and English Nature, working closely with regional partners<sup>5</sup>. The ERVNE Study identified 39 projects with particular potential to generate economic and natural environment benefits, including 2 possible Regional Park projects.

All of the projects considered below have been identified as Regional Park projects in the partial review of RPG issued for consultation by the NWRA in December 2003. A location plan is attached as Annex 1, which indicates the broad location of each Regional Park proposal.

### **East Lancashire**

The East Lancashire Regional Park was established in 2000 as the first Regional Park in the North West. It covers the whole of the East Lancashire Sub-Regional Partnership area encompassing the districts of Ribbles Valley, Pendle, Burnley, Rossendale, Hyndburn and Blackburn and Darwen and has a resident population of more than half a million. The East Lancashire Partnership is the lead organisation, which brings together organisations from across the public, private and voluntary sectors. The concept is included within the East Lancashire Spatial Plan.

The Regional Park is seen as a key element of a twenty year strategy for East Lancashire, and is intended to provide an overarching focus for a wide range of projects targeted at various sectors including environment, transport, housing, economic development, education and health. More specifically, it is hoped that it

<sup>4</sup> The Economic and Regenerative Value of the Natural Environment in the North West (ERVNE) Study, September 2003, ERM

<sup>5</sup> Organisations represented on the Steering Group: The NWDA, English Nature, Cheshire Wildlife Trust, Cumbria Wildlife Trust, Lancashire Wildlife Trust, RSPB, Environment Agency, Regional Assembly for the North West, Countryside Agency, Government Office for the North West, Cheshire County Council, Forestry Commission and the Environmental Advisory Service (EAS)

will improve the image and upgrade the environment of East Lancashire by promoting it as a place to live and work and by helping to attract private sector investment, stimulate urban regeneration, attract new investment and create additional development opportunities. A further benefit is seen to be that the Park will raise the profile and image of East Lancashire as an attractive place to visit and thereby give a boost to the tourism industry. A central aim of the Park is that it should provide local residents and communities with greater opportunities for outdoor leisure and recreation and contribute to their health education and quality of life. In particular, disadvantaged communities will benefit through the enhancement of areas on the urban fringe, with key priorities being the re-use of derelict sites, the reclamation of brownfield land and the diversification of agriculture.

A key priority is to establish a network of routes for walkers, cyclists and horseriders that will serve as an access framework through which residents and visitors will be able to enjoy the Park.

Funding of £5m has been obtained from the Single Regeneration Budget towards the establishment of the park and it is claimed that this has been matched by a further £18m from the public and private sector.

#### **North West Coastal Trail**

The development of a regional coastal trail running along the North West coast from Chester to Carlisle is proposed. This would serve as a long distance route for walkers, and wherever feasible and appropriate, cyclists and horse riders. As well as forming a long distance route it could comprise a series of linked shorter routes, circular or retraceable via public transport. It would not only be a trail but a showcase for aspects of the region's heritage, built and natural, which lie along it. These would enhance the experience of the region's coast not only for visitors but residents also, especially in urban communities. An initial Feasibility Study, financed by the Agency, was completed in April 2003, and concluded that whilst the proposal is ambitious, it could bring a variety of benefits. The report comments that it is essential that the proposed trail is marketed honestly and realistically, stressing its positive attributes e.g. landscapes, birdlife, heritage, visitor attractions and opportunities to discover and enjoy the North West's coast, coastal settlements and heritage, rather than promoting it as an end to end walking or cycling route. The ERVNE Study also suggested a possible project to coordinate and deliver a coast-wide programme of environmental works.

The NWRA and North West Coastal Forum have jointly funded the production of an Implementation Framework, to be completed by Spring 2004, to help progress the proposed North West Coastal Trail. This work will comprise the development of outlines for a series of surveys, assessments and strategies; development of a short/ medium term action plan; and review of organisational options and recommendations for an implementation structure for the proposed Park.

### **Ribble Estuary**

Following initial discussions between the RSPB, English Nature and the Environment Agency, and in consultation with other stakeholders, outline proposals were drawn up for developing a potential Regional Park based on the Ribble Estuary. A study, funded by the NWDA, Sefton MBC, Lancashire County Council and RSPB, was carried out, leading to the production of a Feasibility Study and Strategy in July 2003. The Feasibility Study concludes that the Ribble Estuary would be a highly suitable location for a Regional Park, subject to significant resources being available. It sets out a number of possibilities including: estuary environment management, interpretation and visitor management, access and education and training. The Ribble Estuary Regional Park is also identified as a possible project in the ERVNE study.

The vision for the potential Regional Park is to become the major area of visitor-friendly coastal and wetland environment in North-West England, of national and international significance. The Regional Park will conserve, enhance and promote its environmental, landscape and wetland assets to turn a largely unknown and inaccessible area into a major tourism destination, attracting people to experience its 'wild places'.

The next steps entail determining the level of support that exists among key delivery agencies and potential funders, agreeing a suitable structure and resources for further development of the Regional Park, and establishing which of the proposals are priorities, should the project go ahead.

### **Mersey Waterfront**

The Mersey Estuary is a major trade route, a location for industry, and the backdrop to major urban centres. It is also a powerful natural system with high nature conservation interest.

The vision for the Mersey Waterfront Regional Park is to transform, energise and connect Mersey Waterfront – and all its assets - in producing a unique sense of place which acts as a key attractor of people to live, work, visit and invest in Merseyside.

The Park project is currently managed through a partnership, in which Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council is the accountable body with the Mersey Partnership in support. A steering group has been formed with representation from Merseyside local authorities. A Commencement Business Plan and an initial Delivery Plan have already been prepared. The Agency has allocated £8.5 million to Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council, as the accountable body for Mersey Waterfront, for the initial development of the Regional Park for the period 2002-2005.

### **Morecambe Bay**

This proposal is still in the early stages of development. The Morecambe Bay Partnership are developing proposals for a Regional Park to position Morecambe Bay as a high quality environment. They contend that the areas environmental assets are currently undersold.

The Morecambe Bay Partnership have submitted a proposal for Agency funding which sets out the proposed objectives, outcomes and benefits of a Morecambe Bay Regional Park. These include an enhanced landscape, marketing, interpretation, education and access.

Work has commenced, utilising other funds, on some aspects of the proposal, for example, an Interpretation Strategy was completed in May 2002. However, a Feasibility Study has not been commissioned.

### **Cumbria and Furness Coast**

This proposal is also still in the early stages of development. West Cumbria and Furness is an area of considerable regeneration need. Cumbria County Council's Land Reclamation Strategy, which has NWDA Board approval, describes a vision of reclaiming a network of key sites along the Cumbrian Coast with links to coastal footpaths and cycleway/greenway networks. The County Council has commissioned a study to look at a wide range of issues relating to land reclamation and development in West Cumbria, and this study will consider the possibility of a Regional Park. Policy L54 in the Cumbria and Lake District Joint Structure Plan Review supports the development of regional parks in the vicinity of Whitehaven/Workington and in the vicinity of Barrow in Furness. Detailed Feasibility Studies however, have not been commissioned.

### **Weaver Valley**

A Feasibility Report has been prepared by Arup Consultants on behalf of Cheshire County Council, with a financial contribution from the Agency. Following the study, Cheshire County Council has prepared a draft vision for the Regional Park which states that it will support urban regeneration within 7 of the County's towns; promote tourism and recreation; encourage creative use of derelict land; provide managed access to little known, yet outstanding areas of landscape and nature conservation value; protect and promote the outstanding industrial and built heritage of the Weaver Valley; and develop a land use to create a distinctive landscape and regionally significant biodiversity resource.

The draft vision notes that the salt industry has left a legacy of physical and cultural heritage in canals, buildings, flashes, biodiversity, human history and dereliction that is nationally unique. It is envisaged that the Regional Park would



turn to positive use the Weaver Valley's history of salt extraction and processing which stretches back to pre-Roman times.

The Weaver Valley Regional Park has been identified as a major project in the current review of the Cheshire Structure Plan and the Agency has supported this policy.

#### **Red Rose**

This concept is at a very early stage of development and is referred to in the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) Strategy. The concept appears to envisage a Regional Park for the west of Greater Manchester, stretching from Wigan through Salford and Trafford to the centre of Manchester. This could combine canals, woodlands and wetlands, industrial heritage, sporting, leisure and commercial attractions to create a day visitor attraction. It could form a linear park to follow the Leeds and Liverpool and Bridgewater Canals for over 25km, through Wigan and part of Salford, to where it would link with a narrower urban heritage corridor through Salford, Trafford and Manchester. Some discussions have taken place involving Salford, Trafford and Wigan Councils. It appears that no detailed feasibility study has been undertaken.

#### **Croal-Irwell**

This project is also at a very early stage of development and is referred to in the AGMA Strategy. Some initial discussions have taken place for a Regional Park based around the Irwell Valley. The lead partners could include the Red Rose Forest along with Bolton, Bury and Salford Councils. It appears that no detailed feasibility study has been undertaken.

### **3 PROPOSED POLICY FRAMEWORK**

#### **Existing Regional Park Projects**

For the existing Mersey Waterfront and East Lancashire Regional Parks, the Agency will:-

- Confirm its support in principle;
- Provide resources where appropriate, especially to deal with brownfield land, reclamation and dereliction;
- Support bids to other funding agencies;
- Provide support through the planning process;
- Encourage sub-regional partners to include Regional Park proposals in Sub-Regional Action Plans; and
- Encourage the preparation of clear Regional Park Project Plans.



### **Emerging Regional Park Projects**

Feasibility studies have been undertaken for the North West Coastal Trail, Ribble Estuary and Weaver Valley Regional Park. In relation to these projects the Agency will:-

- Confirm its support in principle;
- Assist in the development of funding packages to facilitate further pilot work to be undertaken;
- Provide support through the planning process;
- Encourage sub-regional partners to include Regional Park proposals in Sub-Regional Action Plans; and
- Encourage the preparation of clear Regional Park Project Plans.

### **Regional Park Projects For Further Study**

The following Regional Park projects are considered worthy of further study - Morecambe Bay, Cumbria and Furness Coast, Red Rose and Croal-Inwell. In relation to these potential projects the Agency will:-

- Encourage sub-regional partners to carry out feasibility studies;
- Assist in the development of these studies; and
- Provide support through the planning process.

### **Next Steps**

It is proposed that the Planning Unit will lead on all Regional Park projects in terms of policy and strategy development. Other parts of the Agency will be involved in implementation and funding issues.

For all Regional Park projects the Agency will encourage proposers to come together to share experience and vision.

This interim Policy Statement will be reviewed and updated as necessary. This would provide the opportunity to consider any other projects should these come forward.

**Northwest Development Agency**  
**February 2004**