

**Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP speech to the Civil Society Advisory Board – 29
October 2013**

Introduction

I would like to thank Defra's Civil Society Advisory Board for organising this event and the RSA for hosting it.

As many of you know, I have four key priorities for Defra. Growing the rural economy. Improving the Environment. Safeguarding both plant and animal health. Civil society has a vital role to play in helping to design and deliver the policies to achieve these goals. Simply, we cannot do it without you.

Historically civil society has led the way on many aspects of Defra's agenda. Its practical contribution continues to be vitally important. For example, of the 90 million wildlife records available online on the National Biodiversity Network Gateway, more than 90 per cent is sourced from skilled volunteers coordinated by over 80 volunteer societies. This data is essential to underpin local decision making and target conservation investment.

As part of civil society, you have an enormous geographical reach. You have a vast amount of expertise. You are passionate. You understand local issues and people trust you to take action. You are potentially the most powerful ally we have to deliver growth while improving the environment. I want us to work together to achieve this.

Room for improvement

Our partnership needs to be built on openness, trust and goodwill on both sides. There are definitely times when we could do better. But we have paid attention to criticism. We are doing things better.

On our deliberations on what to do with the nation's forests, it was said we did not listen or explain ourselves properly. There was no sense of a working partnership to address the future of forestry in England.

There are also times when we have differing views on the best way to make progress. For these issues it's even more important that we talk to each other. We need to understand the range of concerns so that we can take the most robust decisions. We need to look for options that satisfy as many concerns as possible.

That's why I now insist that for all major new policies we must start working with all interested parties as early as possible in the process.

On Forestry, we made sure that in developing our forestry policy we sought the expert advice of civil society. We did this through a large Forestry Summit and by involving local people in discussions about the future of their local woodlands.

The Government's Forestry and Woodlands Policy Statement recognised the need to reconnect communities with their woodlands. The Forestry Commission has been working on this with civil society. Some of these civil society groups, such as The Plunkett Foundation, Locality, and Shared Assets, are members of Defra's Social Enterprise Strategic Partnership or its Civil Society Advisory Board. This has led directly to the formation of the Woodland Social Enterprise Network (WSEN), which is now taking forward development of the pilot project.

There are many other examples. On my return from a trip to Australia and New Zealand earlier in the year, I was determined to look seriously at biodiversity offsetting. To gather evidence and views we had a series of informal meetings with key figures, like Dieter Helm Chairman of the Natural Capital Committee and Ian Cheshire Chairman of the Ecosystems Market Task Force. I've also been to see pilots in the UK for myself – like Ryton Pools Country Park in Warwickshire.

As a result, we've just launched a Green Paper that is a genuine consultation. I really want to hear from wide a range of individuals and organisations. I want to get as much evidence as possible before taking a decision. The consultation closes on 7 November, so get involved.

We're also working hard on planning the next phase of the CAP. There are a lot of crucial decisions to take to get it right for farmers and the environment. I've spoken extensively to farmers, green groups and the delivery bodies to understand their concerns. This summer I went to Agricultural shows from the Royal Cornwall to the Royal Highlands to speak to the local NFU and CLA to get their views. I've been visited many farms and been to local meetings of farmers to hear what they want from the new CAP. I have also led meetings where interested parties can talk to each other to understand the full range of concerns.

We need to work together to make sure our policies are effective and can be delivered as simply as possible.

Civil Society

Civil society ranges from the largest NGOs, such as the RSPB and the National Trust, to the multitude of small community groups that are vital to the lives of our towns and villages up and down the country. Some civil society organisations are major businesses employing thousands of people. Many, however, are run on a shoestring and rely primarily on local volunteers for their survival.

1,800 charities in England and Wales have the environment as their primary focus. Around 7,700 organisations make up the broader environmental sector. Rural areas have a higher prevalence of local civil society organisations than urban areas. This is particularly marked for environmental organisations.

I want to work with all of you. And with the organisations for whom the environment is not centre stage but who still have a vital contribution to make. Such as the Women's Institutes, development trusts, and social enterprises.

Defra needs to engage and work with civil society now more than ever. This is both an opportunity and a necessity. Public expectations are rising as Defra's capability to deliver independently of others becomes more constrained. The issues Defra is responsible for matter hugely to citizens and consumers. They touch hearts and minds very deeply. They underpin the quality of peoples' lives.

It is, therefore, both natural and necessary that Defra and civil society should work together to tackle these issues – growing the rural economy, improving the environment and safeguarding both plant and animal health.

Above all, I want to play to civil society's strengths. I want to bring your experience and expertise to the co-design of policy so that we get it right, rather than wasting our time with distracting squabbles. I want to use civil society's freedom and flexibility to innovate to deliver locally tailored policy solutions.

I want to take advantage of civil society's ability to access volunteer time to deliver services more efficiently. You have access to more varied sources of funding, because civil society's business models can be geared up to income generation. You can build trust with sceptical groups that may be more willing to do business with civil society than with central government. We can develop shared responsibility with communities and individuals for policy delivery, management of assets, and outcomes.

I would like to encourage voluntary action in neighbourhoods and communities, without the use of regulation or reliance on unsustainable levels of public sector funding. I want to build on the good atmosphere of the Olympics where volunteers turned out in huge numbers to make the Games really memorable.

Civil society can inspire and exemplify this ethos through the vitality of its local networks. It can develop stronger partnerships on the ground, which secure a more diverse contribution from government agencies, local communities, local government, and business.

Good examples

One of the projects currently being taken forward by Defra's Civil Society Advisory Board is the *Lost Effra* project. It is looking at how civil society leadership by the London Wildlife Trust and a small amount of government funding can find new ways of managing the local water environment in the Herne Hill district of London.

Ultimately, the role of civil society can be self-sustaining. You can help improve the local environment, through community or social enterprises. You can help to deliver education and training. Help to improve the health and wellbeing of local people, and contribute directly and significantly to economic growth.

This is my vision, but of course it is not down to civil society to make this happen. Government needs to play a strategic role in leading, enabling and supporting this relationship.

There are now many examples of Defra and its network working innovatively and successfully in partnership with civil society. Sometimes the most effective way for government to empower civil society is for government to get out of people's hair.

The best example of Defra employing this approach is the establishment of the Canal and River Trust in July 2012. We transferred the functions, assets and liabilities of British Waterways in England and Wales to a charitable body - the Canal & River Trust (CRT). This gave waterways users and communities a much greater involvement in managing their waterways, while improving the long term financial sustainability of the waterways.

In my own constituency, I've seen the incredible impact that this can have. The Montgomery canal is being improved by volunteers who travel from the big conurbations in the West Midlands at the weekends.

The civil society model has provided the opportunity for additional revenue growth. It has access to charitable grants and donations. It can make efficiency savings. It can use volunteers. The Trust has had a successful first year which included the recruitment of more than 450 volunteer lock keepers, 17 community canal adoptions and over 29,000 volunteer days.

Communication and mobilising people

Sometimes the focus will be on using civil society as a conduit for communication and raising awareness. An excellent example of this is the *If They're Gone* campaign, which I launched in March this year. The campaign highlights the threats posed to four iconic endangered species - rhinos, tigers, orang-utans and elephants.

It involves more than 20 key wildlife organisations, zoos and safari parks. It will provide the public with information on the plight of these species and give practical advice on how people's decisions can help save these majestic animals from extinction.

Sometimes a successful partnership depends on civil society mobilising resources at the local level, for example in The Big Tree Plant. This is supporting communities to plant a million new trees, often in areas of urban deprivation. Working with civil society organisations has been fundamental to the on-going success of the project. The Tree Council and others have raised significant amounts of match funding, almost double the £4m made available from government. They have provided routes to a huge range of community groups. They have helped to ensure the grant application process remains fair and robustly monitored.

Without this extensive partnership working, The Big Tree Plant simply could not have happened. Early and continued engagement with civil society has been essential in defining objectives that are enhancing peoples' lives and the places they live.

Partnership working

I'm particularly pleased with the way we've worked together on tackling irresponsible dog ownership. Defra funding helped the RSPCA, the Dogs Trust and Battersea Cats and Dogs home to run community projects on encouraging responsible ownership. And on microchipping, these organisations are making our policy a reality by not only providing free microchipping but also using their member networks to explain the importance.

The Paths for Communities scheme shows how Defra's network can successfully work with local partnerships. £2 million was provided under the Rural Development Programme for England to enable rural communities to work with landowners to develop and enhance local public paths. As well as the obvious benefits to the local communities, projects like this have the potential to boost the local economy, for example through tourism.

The scale and scope of bids from communities have proved this is working well. More than forty communities have committed almost 1480 volunteer days to the projects. Perhaps even more tellingly, from the forty-three successful applications, there have only been two cases where facilitation payments were sought by landowners. This approach, where the community has engaged with affected landowners has been highly productive. The leadership role of civil society at the local level is vital to the formation of working partnerships of this kind.

During the Chalara outbreak, the contribution of the public and civil society was invaluable to identify diseased trees and monitor the spread of the disease. There was an innovative use of technology to make this possible – the Chalara mobile phone app.

We're now taking this partnership work forward in a really exciting way with the Observatree project. Civil Society will be helping to safeguard the health of our plants. It builds on the OPAL Tree Health Survey which was launched in May. The Observatree project starts this autumn. It aims to develop an early warning system for pest and disease threats to the United Kingdom's trees. It is led by Forest Research, the research agency of the Forestry Commission. The project's partners also include the Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera), the Woodland Trust, and the National Trust.

The Woodland Trust and National Trust will use their experience to recruit and train a network of volunteers and tree health champions from a wide spectrum of backgrounds. The volunteers will be ordinary citizens and those already working in forestry, horticulture and arboriculture. They will support Forest Research scientists by acting as a first line of response to reports of tree pests and diseases sent in by the public. They will screen and filter reported incidents, enabling public-sector scientists to focus on those reports of greatest significance.

This is a brilliant example of how civil society can mobilise people to engage with an area of policy which would normally be considered the preserve of specialists.

We are building local partnerships in a variety of areas – Local Nature Partnerships, Nature Improvement Areas, and the Catchment Based Approach. This is the best way of directly engaging communities in the management of their local environment.

Many of the Nature Improvement Area partnerships are led by civil society organisations, with the aim of creating an environment that is better for wildlife and people. Earlier this month I want to see this approach for myself in Nene Valley, Northamptonshire, where 25 different organisations are working together to improve the local environment.

The Catchment Based Approach is being rolled out across all of England's 89 river catchments. It will form the principle mechanism to deliver our national water quality targets. Interested parties from the local area will take part in the decision making.

What's next

Looking ahead, I want to build on our success by developing even better and more extensive formal and informal partnerships with civil society organisations. I want to see this become a commonplace feature of how my department does business. This will change the culture of both Defra and civil society. On both sides I believe the change will be for the better, but the demands and impacts of the change need to be recognised and managed.

Our mindset will be that partnership with civil society is critical to successful delivery of our policies. Not as something "nice to have" but something essential. All areas of the department should automatically consider the use of partnerships when developing new policies and programmes. They will not be applicable in all cases, but range of delivery options should always include civil society partnerships.

This will require us to embed the spirit of the Compact, the agreement re-launched in 2010 between central government and civil society, more systematically within the department. For instance, by ensuring that the way we consult and the way we procure reflect the importance we place on civil society engagement. Engagement which is both broad and deep, going well beyond the usual suspects. We are already doing this for all our big new policies.

To kick-start this process, every Defra official will see the text of this speech, backed-up by a message from Bronwyn Hill, Defra's Permanent Secretary. Her message will underline the importance of partnership working in all our dealings with civil society. Guidance on effective engagement techniques is being prepared by Defra's Civil Society Advisory Board and will be disseminated to all core Defra staff.

The Civil Society Advisory Board has acted as Defra's strategic interface with civil society since it was established in 2009. I am very grateful to the Board for the support and advice it has generously provided. In line with Cabinet Office regulations on advisory bodies the Board's lifespan is time limited and it will be wound up in March 2014. However, I am determined to build on the Board's legacy. The Board is currently advising us about the form its successor body should take.

The key role of the new body will be to provide us with rapid, targeted access to expert advice from all of the sectors of civil society. This advisory network will underpin our partnership ethos. It will work both at a strategic level and on specific, technical policy questions. I intend this new body to be a pioneer in Whitehall. I hope many of you will be involved with it.

Concluding remarks

My aim is that my department is a beacon of excellence in Whitehall in the way it works with civil society. I want us to be open, innovative and efficient. The design and delivery of our policies should be transformed through partnership working at national and local levels. I want Defra to be the benchmark in government of how to work constructively with civil society.

I want civil society to know this, and to want to work with us. I want civil society to help design innovative delivery systems at local levels. This is how we will all work together to boost the rural economy while improving the environment. This partnership working should help safeguard our plants and animals.

Ultimately, what I want to achieve is a thriving network of partnerships at the local and national levels. They should support targeted interventions by government, growing the economy and improving the environment.

For all of us, there are significant challenges involved in maximising the benefits from this relationship. I am confident that by pooling our collective goodwill and creativity we can, and will, succeed.

I look forward to working with you.