**Green Halo Partnership Conference: 9 June 2021**

**Speech: Alison Barnes**

* Welcome to our event, so pleased to see our best turnout for this latest of our annual conferences – albeit it in slightly different circumstances from its predecessors
* We’re marking the fifth anniversary of the Green Halo Partnership – an idea that grew from a discussion with local businesses in the spring of 2016 and was formally launched later that year
* Back then the concept of *natural capital*: the notion that our natural environment provides good and services which we people depend on for a good quality of life was confined a relatively small number of specialists: ecologists, economists who understood how natural systems function
* Yes plenty of people cared about the environment, they wanted to protect natural spaces and species. But generally the choice was seen as one of either or: you could only protect nature if you made economic sacrifices. Thinking in terms of natural capital, acknowledging what nature provides for us for free, leads to a different, more constructive way of thinking
* Natural capital sees nature as a benefit, an opportunity, it acknowledges that nature and prosperity are not separate ideas, we need the former to achieve the latter. And it’s an idea which helps us understand we are prosperous because of nature, not despite it
* Our part of the world has a diverse and strong economy, albeit we’ve been hit, like so many others, by the turmoil of Covid. And we also have a fantastic environment: from internationally renowned sites for birds along the Solent to green spaces at the heart of our towns and cities. We are even blessed, dare I say, with a fantastic National Park, charged with protecting some of our unique habitats! All in all, we have what I like to call a World Class Economy and a World Class Environment
* That means we have a unique opportunity in the central South to explore just how we can work with nature to tackle all the challenges we face, from building an economy that works for everyone to tackling health inequalities or air pollution
* Since our Partnership began the environment has rocketed up the political agenda. And, more importantly, ordinary people have become much more aware of nature and what it offers. The past 18 months has seen so many recognising the value of natural space for their mental and physical wellbeing, a perfect example of what nature offers
* In fact it’s pleasing to see quite how far we’ve moved in those five years. It’s not just about people beginning to enjoy the natural world:
  + businesses are talking about the opportunities natural capital offers
  + developers are including natural capital in their planning for new places
  + the Government are building their future subsidy regime for agriculture around the principle of *public money for public good* – guided by the notion that we should invest in protecting and improving the nation’s stock of natural capital
* A huge amount of credit for the way the conversation has developed is down to the work of our keynote speaker – Professor Dieter Helm – and his colleagues on the Natural Capital Committee. Their ten years of study, reporting, lobbying and advocating is why natural capital has become central to our environmental debate
* But at a local level, I think the Green Halo Partnership can take at least some of the credit for the fact that natural capital is also part of the conversation across Hampshire and Dorset. We’re not, of course, alone in making the case for it lying at the heart of our decision making: organisations like our Wildlife Trusts, Local Nature Partnerships and many others have also been central to raising awareness and taking practical actions
* Other speakers at this morning’s conference are great examples of what’s now happening across the South
  + Aldred Drummond will tell us about the work he’s leading to create a major new place along the Solent which has natural capital at its heart
  + Solent LEP, whose Chief Executive Anne-Marie Mountifield will respond to Dieter Helm, have recognised the importance of natural capital in a place with a world class environment to match our world class economy
  + Layne Hamerston from Bournemouth University, co-founder of the Nature Health Network, will also respond to Dieter
  + And one really important voice is Joseph Owen, a PhD student at Southampton who has worked with me on a model for a green recovery. The next generation will be crucial in picking up the pace on protecting and enhancing our natural capital, and I know Joseph will articulate that perspective well
* These are just a few of the examples of the ideas and initiatives taking shape across our region. All have taken shape because people came together to explore opportunities and to ask ‘why not?’
* And that is what the Green Halo Partnership is about. We’ve never been a Partnership blessed with big budgets to support major projects which protect or enhance ecosystem services. Rather our role has right from the start been different – we aim to start conversations, raise awareness, bring people together and generate ideas
* Perhaps you can think of the Partnership as a safe space for debate: where we can challenge one another, think about new ideas, fresh ways of working together
* But today isn’t just about looking back on the last few years. I want us to look forward, indeed we must look forward. As it becomes ever more important that we take urgent action to reduce carbon, reverse the decline in biodiversity or tackle air pollution, so we need to ensure we use the opportunities natural capital offers to make genuine improvements to our place
* I’ve already recognised just how important the environment has become in our political debate. International conferences, like the UK’s hosting of COP26, radical new approaches to public subsidy or fresh approaches to determining the economic value of nature are all good, so long as they move the debate forward. But I’m convinced the real change we must make is at a local level: changing the behaviour of local people, influencing the decisions of local councils, guiding investment by local businesses
* And that is what I believe the Green Halo Partnership should be focusing on as we look forward to 2030 and beyond. We need to be exploring the practical actions which will build and strengthen our stock of natural capital, and ensure that we use that stock to help communities reach net zero, close the health gaps across our cities and cutting air pollution
* I want to close by setting us three challenges for the future:
  + Raising awareness and understanding;
  + Making a positive improvement in our stock of natural capital; and
  + Promoting projects and solutions
* On the first of these, we have a good base to build on. The fact that we had well over 100 people from across the public and private sectors sign up to todays event is really encouraging. But I’m convinced we need to reach more people, to raise awareness and to stimulate action. So I want to continue to build the Partnership, and ensure that organisations across our region understand the benefits our natural capital can offer, and how they can realise those benefits
* We need to think about how best to broaden our engagement as a Partnership, and with who. Joseph Owen has already eloquently made the case for young people. I was intrigued to see the actor Mark Rylance saying just last week that the arts should “tell love stories about nature” to tackle the climate crisis. Who are the people, the sectors in the central South we need to join us in making the case for natural capital?
* On my second challenge, as I’ve said our region already has a great environment, and with that a good stock of natural capital. But audits show there are weaknesses, and we know nature is challenged, whether by development or people pressures. As a Partnership we must speak out to protect natural capital where we see a threat, but we must also find positive ways of improving our stock. That’s an investment for our future, but it is also good for us, for business, for local people and for our place
* And lastly, we must continue to find and promote the projects which can make a real difference. We will hear about some of those later today, from Aldred’s work at Fawley waterside to what the Solent Freeport might offer. I’m part of the team leading a great project to build a green recovery for the central South – the *Greenprint*. It’s a fantastic example of how we can bring the region together to achieve shared benefits and improvements, building on nature. We need to keep finding the gaps and filling them with such positive initiatives
* But those are just my priorities. You will all have your own ideas, and will all be able to offer something to our debate and, I hope, to the future of the Green Halo Partnership. I’m really looking forward to hearing Dieter and our other speakers and to your response. More importantly, I’m looking forward to working with you to improve our place as the Green Halo moves on to its next phase.