

A Case for Strategic Landscape Infrastructure: South Essex Estuary Park

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Abstract : Alexandra Steed URBAN was commissioned to undertake the South Essex Green and Blue Infrastructure Study (SEGBI) on behalf of the Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA): a partnership of seven neighboring councils within the Thames Estuary. Located on London's doorstep, the 70,000-hectare region is under extraordinary pressure for regeneration, further development, and economic expansion, yet faces extreme challenges: sea-level rise and inadequate flood defenses, stormwater flooding and threatened infrastructure, loss of internationally important habitats, significant existing community deprivation, and lack of connectivity and access to green space. The brief was to embrace these challenges in the creation of a document that would form a key part of ASELA's Joint Strategic Framework and feed into local plans and master plans. Thus, helping to tackle climate change, ecological collapse, and social inequity at a regional scale whilst creating a relationship and awareness between urban communities and the surrounding landscapes and nature. The SEGBI project applied a 'land-based' methodology, combined with a co-design approach involving numerous stakeholders, to explore how living infrastructure can address these significant issues, reshape future planning and development, and create thriving places for the whole community of life. It comprised three key stages, including Baseline Review; Green and Blue Infrastructure Assessment; and the final Green and Blue Infrastructure Report. The resulting proposals frame an ambitious vision for the delivery of a new regional South Essex Estuary (SEE) Park - 24,000 hectares of protected and connected landscapes. This unified parkland system will drive effective place-shaping and "leveling up" for the most deprived communities while providing large-scale nature recovery and biodiversity net gain. Comprehensive analysis and policy recommendations ensure best practices will be embedded within planning documents and decisions guiding future development. Furthermore, a Natural Capital Account was undertaken as part of the strategy showing the tremendous economic value of the natural assets. This strategy sets a pioneering precedent that demonstrates how the prioritisation of living infrastructure has the capacity to address climate change and ecological collapse, while also supporting sustainable housing, healthier communities, and resilient infrastructures. It was only achievable through a collaborative and cross-boundary approach to strategic planning and growth, with a shared vision of place, and a strong commitment to delivery. With joined-up thinking and a joined-up region, a more impactful plan for South Essex was developed that will lead to numerous environmental, social, and economic benefits across the region, and enhancing the landscape and natural environs on the periphery of one of the largest cities in the world.

Keywords : climate change, green and blue infrastructure, landscape architecture, master planning, regional planning, social equity

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