

Emma Howard Boyd, Green Summit speech

I want to start by thanking Andy Burnham for inviting me to speak today. I always enjoy the Green Summit. But, not because I get to tell you all about what my Environment Agency colleagues are doing here in Greater Manchester... although that IS a privilege. I love it because I get to travel to Manchester, meet you, and find out all about the great projects going on in the region. I always leave feeling inspired by your enthusiasm. So, I'm disappointed not to experience that this year.

Instead, I'm speaking to you from my home in Bristol. Another city that shares your passion for the environment. I saw Greta Thunberg when she spoke to a large crowd here earlier in the year. A reminder, if one were needed, that while we seek local solutions to environmental problems in different places, we need them all to add up to something greater than the sum of their parts.

The flood experts at the Environment Agency know all too well that many puddles make a river. The UK had 266 hours of sunshine in May. The previous record for a month was 265 hours in June 1957. Until now, no year has ever had more than 555 hours of sunshine in the spring. This year, we had 626 hours.

This wasn't long after the wettest February on record when highest or second highest river levels on record were reached on 13 rivers. The water levels were higher than the summer floods of 2007 when 55,000 properties flooded.

And while many places did flood and that is a horrible experience for those affected, we estimate that our flood schemes protected over 128,000 properties. Less than 1% of properties at risk in England flooded. And, while the Met Office says there could be more unsettled weather this autumn. We must hope for the best and prepare for the worst.

Beyond our borders, climate extremes and the mass extinction of nature exponentially threatens lives. Whether as Chair of the Environment Agency, as a member of the Global Commission on Adaptation or the UK's Board of Trade, I am hyper conscious that we must galvanise global action to avoid climate shocks that could eclipse the economic effects of the coronavirus crisis. The wildfires in California are just another symptom of a disease we are failing to cure.

But, I don't despair.

Your work here in Greater Manchester – demonstrating the links between economic success, health and well-being, and a healthy environment – is helping Governments on the international stage understand how it's done. Projects like IGNITION, which aims to attract investment for green and blue spaces; should inspire private sector take-up of similar schemes all over the world.

River Irwell

You have just heard from the Youth Combined Authority about the importance of green space. Two weeks ago, the Environment Agency put out our State of the Environment report on Health, People and the Environment, I encourage you to read it, it brings together a lot of evidence about why green spaces reduce the burden on the NHS.

The coronavirus pandemic exposed and amplified green inequality in society. Too many towns and cities in England, especially those with a strong industrial heritage, have too little green space, too few trees, culverted rivers, poor air quality and are at risk of flooding. This holds back economic growth and the building of new homes, but it's also a fundamental moral issue.

Areas of higher deprivation and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic populations have less access to high quality green and blue space and this contributes to differing disease burdens and life expectancy. Creating, and connecting people with, green or blue spaces – as you are doing here in Manchester – will support new local jobs and benefit health & well-being. There is a moment of opportunity right now.

The pandemic led to an increased appreciation of nature and more engagement with the water environment. Hilary McGrady, the National Trust's Director General said the recovery must respond "to what the lockdown has clearly shown: that people want and need access to nature-rich green spaces near where they live".

At a time when there is such widespread recognition that the physical and mental health of everyone depends on quality green and blue space, we should value work to protect and enhance the natural world more highly.

In June, the Prime Minister said the way back from the economic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic was to "Build, Build, Build". This initially caused some alarm, but building back "better, Greener, and faster" could be an opportunity to make development healthier.

The Government is right to emphasise 'levelling up'; we must make the case that access to green and blue spaces for all adults and children is vital to that. Air pollution today remains the single biggest environmental threat to health in the UK, shortening tens of thousands of lives each year. Even during the industrial revolution, the Victorians realised that parks would provide cities with "lungs".

Today our ambition can be greater: if we are to Build, Build, Build, we must do so in ways that will help people to Breathe, Breathe, Breathe. The Environment Agency works to speed up sustainable development by helping developers meet regulatory requirements efficiently, providing advice so they get it right first time. It is encouraging to see house builders revisiting plans in light of coronavirus with a focus on providing more and better quality green and blue spaces.

The Environment Agency in Greater Manchester has been working collaboratively to deliver sustainable economic growth with a focus on supporting a green and resilient recovery post pandemic. For instance, the leaders of our area team sit on the Greater Manchester Infrastructure Programme Executive Steering Group, and our support will assist the City Region to explore a devolved infrastructure programme that has the environment, and biodiversity net gain at its heart.

We've also given direct support for local Housing Infrastructure Fund bids, one of which saw £27 million secured to deliver flood risk mitigation, river re-naturalisation, and land remediation on the Northern Gateway site. We've helped the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the British Geological Society develop and test an innovative brownfield land cost calculator, to understand viability constraints for future development. And, we've supported the Greater Manchester Combined Authority to develop its 'Greater Manchester Environment Fund', to develop investible packages of environmental projects, with an ambition to provide around £5 million worth of annual environmental project investment opportunities within five years.

In March this year the Urban Pioneer ended after three years. It improved understanding of a natural capital approach; created a safe space for partners to come together and innovate; and supported the development of the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan.

Along the way we discovered that in Greater Manchester air quality regulation prevents around 60 deaths a year, 44,000 buildings benefit from reduced road traffic noise, and 1 million people receive mental health benefits from access to green space every year.

Steered by the ambition of the 25 Year Environment Plan, the principle of net gain, and the idea of natural capital, we can improve the country's health through the choices Governments, businesses and individuals make. These range from multibillion-pound investments in green infrastructure and procurement, to healthy choices such as walking and cycling to work, or putting in place property level resilience to reduce the disruption caused by flooding, which is known to have significant mental health impacts.

Between 2015 – 2019 risk management authorities, including the Environment Agency and local authorities, reduced risk to over 2,400 residential properties in Greater Manchester, with the project benefits being significantly more than their £22 million cost. The Salford Scheme delivered a new wetland which provides a fantastic recreational resource for the local community. I have visited the scheme on a number of occasions with Paul Dennett, the Mayor of Salford, most recently in February to see how it worked successfully as a flood storage basin during Storm Ciara.

Environment Agency Salford flood improvement scheme wetlands

We are currently working with organisations such as the Woodland Trust and Moors for the Future to create Natural Flood Management (NFM) projects across

Greater Manchester at the top of catchments, which will reduce flood risk and enhance the green space on your doorstep.

River Mersey

While the world's attention turned to the coronavirus crisis this year, flood risk and other shocks precipitated by the climate emergency did not go away. Nor did the importance of restoring nature, here in Greater Manchester and around the world. Throughout the coronavirus lockdown, the Environment Agency remained fully operational, with the majority of staff working from home...and, frontline staff remaining active on the ground tackling issues such as pollution incidents. Work continued on 90 per cent of our flood and coastal risk projects. This work is vital to people's health and financial well-being locally, nationally and around the world.

In June, Dr Maria Neira, Director of Environment, Climate Change and Health at the World Health Organization, said:

The world has gathered around one goal: the race to zero deaths from COVID-19. A healthy recovery from this pandemic means we need to continue and expand this race to zero deaths from climate change and environmental pollution, a race to zero people pushed into poverty because of health costs, to zero people breathing polluted air.

That may seem like a big ask, but there are projects going on right here in Manchester that could help show the way. Although we are not all in the same room, or even in the same city, those are stories we can tell the whole world, together.

Thank you very much.