

Speech: What we talk about when we talk about green cities

'What we talk about when we talk about green cities'

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In an article for the New Statesman in January, the editor of the Today Programme, Sarah Sands, wrote about the type of language that works in newspapers and words that work on the radio.

She shared an anecdote about working with Prince Harry, who guest edited the show over Christmas.

During an on air discussion about supermarkets and plastic, the Prince wanted the presenter to ask:

"Do we need to create a circular rather than a linear economy?"

An important question that I'm sure many people will want to discuss today.

But instead of asking that, the editor pressed the button and said to the presenter:

"Say, should there be more pressure from the government?"

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This is an important lesson for those of us who care about green issues.

If we are to persuade people of our cause we should note that even Prince Harry can't get the "circular economy" on the radio.

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Of course – there are good reasons for using nerdy terms like "the circular economy", "natural capital" and "climate resilience".

But, the seemingly impossible scale of these issues is bigger than our day to day activities.

So, the words we use as shorthand, aren't part of everyday language.

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I want to thank the Mayor for inviting me to join you today.

Manchester is the perfect place to talk about these things.

As the cradle of the industrial revolution – and a place that has reinvented

itself more than once – these huge global challenges are alive in your city.

In Manchester:

- the circular economy is emptying your recycling bin;
- natural capital is flowing into the Manchester Ship Canal;
- And, climate resilience is walking through your sewers.

(I know this because I have walked in your sewers with the Environment Agency's confined spaces team – who work to reduce flood risk from the rivers beneath Manchester's streets.)

The challenges facing the world in the next century will be felt most by people living in cities.

The Committee on Climate Change has identified increased flooding as the biggest climate risk facing the UK.

And, in November 2017, Moody's rating agency warned cities to address climate risk or face credit downgrades.

Climate change will bring heavier storms than the one you saw here on Boxing Day 2015.

We must ensure Manchester's investments and ambitions are not undermined by the weather.

We need to stop force majeure from becoming run-of-the-mill.

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So, what to do?

Well, the short answer is you need to attract enough industry and development to invest in resilient infrastructure, so that you can keep your power, water, communications and transport running smoothly in all conditions – while ensuring that you don't lose the natural environment and culture that made people want to live in Manchester in the first place.

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I said it was the short answer, not that it was an easy answer.

But, Manchester has faithfully reinvented itself before, so let's roll our sleeves up and do it again.

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There are many people who are here today to help – and as Chair of the Environment Agency, I want us to be your partner of choice in your ambition to become one of Europe's leading green cities.

As an emergency responder, our first priority is your safety in severe weather.

Our broader role is to protect and enhance the environment while ensuring sustainable growth and development.

We're working with Business in the Community to bring companies in Manchester together with local communities and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority to deliver sustainable drainage in schools and for the NHS.

For four years, we've been working in the GMCA – and its predecessors – allowing us to enhance the contribution of natural assets like clean air, water and green space while protecting major investments.

For instance, the £1 billion redevelopment of the old Royal Mail Depot near Piccadilly.

We are supporting GMCA's involvement with the Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities programme, helping Manchester prepare to meet the challenges of 21st century life.

Through your selection as the Government's Urban Pioneer, we are exploring the potential for taking a natural capital approach to development decisions.

We are working to improve water quality in the city's rivers and we have restocked the River Irwell with 10,000 course fish for local anglers.

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Most of all, we are part of Manchester.

Our work, ably led by area director Lee Rawlinson, creates new jobs and local skills among colleagues and partners who are proud to call Manchester home.

The Government's 25 Year Environment Plan puts natural capital at the heart of the industrial strategy.

It also says we will make sure "that all policies, programmes and investment decisions take into account the possible extent of climate change this century."

We currently have 1659 kilometres of flood assets in Greater Manchester, including the recent £10 million Salford Flood Improvements Scheme, delivered with Salford City Council, which protects nearly 2,000 properties.

As well as protecting existing development, it enables over 90 hectares of regeneration in Lower Broughton and delivered 5.5 hectares of new wetland habitat, 10 hectares of wildflower meadow and 2.5 kilometres of new footpath and cycleway.

By giving people safe lanes to cycle on, we can also reduce emissions from the roads – helping everyone breathe cleaner air.

While looking at the potential for that scheme, we discovered 344 kilometres of Greater Manchester's flood assets are within 10 metres of a cycle path.

So, I am announcing today that we will work with Chris Boardman, the walking and cycling commissioner, to make our flood assets part of the city's cycle lanes.

This is a fantastic example of how to combine natural capital, with climate resilience, wildlife protection and the creation of green spaces.

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But I realise that such projects usually require a lot of private sector investment to get off the ground.

We're working on it.

I've got 25 years' experience in the financial services industry and I'm a member of the government's Green Finance Taskforce, which reports in to Claire Perry, who we just heard from, and the Treasury.

We're pushing for the development of natural capital thinking in the UK to create more opportunities to generate revenue from projects that improve the natural environment.

Measuring the benefits of these will sharpen the business case for investment and help to unlock private finance for environmental projects, thereby supporting the resilience of UK infrastructure.

An understanding of natural capital will certainly help climate resilience, but how does the circular economy fit in?

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At the end of 2017, Blue Planet 2 focussed minds on the impacts of plastic pollution.

That television programme – called “public service broadcasting at its finest” by the Prime Minister, has already made a difference to our lives, with the extension of the plastic bag charge.

But it seems tackling plastic pollution is a bit like spring cleaning: as soon as you start, you find more dirt.

Just last week, researchers from The University of Manchester told us they had found the highest levels of microplastics anywhere in the world in the River Tame, in Denton.

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We're working with the water industry and leading academics to investigate microplastics entering the environment.

This work will inform plans to tackle the pollution at the source, before it reaches local rivers.

In January, I was in Cornwall announcing £750,000 for a scheme to fight

plastic washing up on beaches – a pilot scheme that we hope will inform further action around the country.

I am hopeful, but I don't underestimate the challenge.

Councils are already feeling the Chinese government's decision to ban imports of plastic waste, as this adds millions of tonnes of waste to our current systems.

Waste management businesses are the unsung heroes of the environmental movement.

Their work to ensure that the Right Waste goes to the Right Place, is an essential service.

Unfortunately, good waste businesses are too often undermined.

The economic impact of waste crime in England in 2015 was estimated to be at least £604 million – not to mention the incalculable misery and ill health it brings to people all over the country.

The Environment Agency stands with Greater Manchester police and authorities all over the country in our commitment to stamp out environmental crime.

In January, new powers were introduced for my colleagues to lock gates and block access to problem waste sites.

Last year, we were closing over 2 illegal waste sites every day and we will always push for prosecution.

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For example, last year:

- Barry Kilroe was sentenced in Manchester Crown Court to 15 months after breaching permit conditions at two waste sites that caught fire – closing the M60 motorway and the Manchester to Liverpool railway line.
- David Shrigley (not the artist) was sentenced to 40 days for refusing to remove waste from a site in Cornwall that posed a serious fire risk and environmental harm.
- Martin McDonagh ran away to Ireland to avoid 20 months for removing household waste in Plymouth and dumping it randomly out the back of a blue transit van. We're pursuing him with a European arrest warrant.
- Lee Hazel in Wiltshire was given a confiscation order of £1.97million, with an 8 year custodial sentence should he fail to pay, following the disposal of waste on a farm and the illegal importation and treatment of unpermitted waste.

- And, on October 30, 6 former corporate officers of waste companies in Nottinghamshire got a mixture of immediate prison sentences, suspended prison sentences and community orders following illegal waste operations in the Midlands.

These are just a few examples of our action.

I am proud of my colleagues in the Environment Agency for their bravery in bringing these criminals to justice and I am pleased that following sentencing guidelines in 2014, courts began imposing higher fines for environmental offences.

However, for the damage these crimes do to the environment and to communities' health and wellbeing; for their flagrant disregard for public safety; for the money taken out of pockets of responsible local businesses, and – in some cases – into the pockets of organised crime: I still don't think the deterrent is strong enough.

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Today, I am calling for higher fines and custodial sentences for waste criminals.

How we deal with the rising tide of waste is a global challenge, but no one should have to live next door to this disgusting criminality:

Not by the sea; not in the countryside; and not in Manchester.

Of course, I realise we won't solve all of our waste problems with jail time.

Waste criminals are exploiting the weaknesses of a linear economy.

In this role, I've visited illegal waste sites, and I can tell you that packaging from even the most responsible businesses ends up there.

All companies need to consider their duty of care in fully understanding where their waste products go.

I look forward to hearing from Marks & Spencer's Mike Barry – speaking next – about this area of their business.

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Everyone should be challenging themselves to do more.

A circular economy is a useful target to aim for.

Ultimately, the circular economy, natural capital and climate resilience are simply useful pointers to a better way of organising ourselves.

And they apply in Manchester as much as anywhere else in the world.

If they sound complicated – that's because life is pretty complicated.

Maybe we should take the advice of the American writer Nora Ephron who said:

“It will be a little messy, but embrace the mess. It will be complicated, but rejoice in the complications.”

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As we try to understand these vast, complicated challenges today at the Green Summit, I want to leave you with one very simple thought:

The Environment Agency is here to help.

Thank you.