

**Environment & Sustainable
Communities Overview and
Scrutiny Committee**

24 November 2023

**Local Nature Recovery
Strategy Update**



**Report of Alan Patrickson Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods
and Climate Change**

Purpose of the Report

- 1 The purpose of the report is to provide members of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee an update on the progress of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Executive summary

- 2 Durham County Council is the responsible authority tasked with production of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy.
- 3 DEFRA provided Regulations and Guidance around the LNRS in March 2023 and work to date has concentrated engaging with the Local Records Centre, setting up Regional Steering Groups and establishing lines of communication and contacts with Government Agencies Natural England, Environment Agency, and Forestry Commission and developing the engagement and consultation process.

Recommendations

- 4 That the Environment & Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the contents of the report.

Background

- 5 Local Nature Recovery Strategies are a new, England-wide system of spatial strategies that will establish priorities and map proposals for specific actions to drive nature's recovery and provide wider environmental benefits. The requirement for there to be Local Nature Recovery Strategies, what they are and how they should generally work has been established by the Environment Act 2021.

- 6 Local Nature Recovery Strategies are a way of prioritising nature's needs on a more local and focused level. The strategy will become a blueprint for the recovery of nature, showing how and where we can support things like wildflower grasslands, woodlands, wetlands, and new hedgerows.

Alongside nature recovery the LNRS will also help by guiding

- Planning and development: It will guide how and where we plan for new development and direct developers towards the best places to deliver their Biodiversity Net Gain requirements (BNG)
 - Agri-environment funding: It will help shape the local roll out of the new Environmental Land Management Scheme
 - Nature-based solutions: It will identify key locations for nature-based solutions for climate change.
 - Health and Well-being. It will promote the development of accessible nature-rich spaces.
 - Investment: It will help to attract and guide future investment for nature recovery in County Durham
- 7 The LNRS is comprised of a habitat map (that defines the existing resource and where resources should be directed to deliver nature conservation) alongside a Statement of Priorities (that identifies the priority habitats and species in County Durham with associated targets and actions).
 - 8 The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has appointed 48 responsible authorities (RA) to lead on preparing a local nature recovery strategy for their area. Together these 48 strategy areas cover the whole of England with no gaps or overlaps.
 - 9 Durham County Council is the responsible authority tasked by DEFRA to produce the LNRS.
 - 10 The Ecological Emergency Workstream of the Environment & Climate Change Partnership has as its current priority to assist in the development of the LNRS.
 - 11 Ring-fenced funding has been received from DEFRA for the financial year 2023/24. This funding has been earmarked to facilitate the development of the habitat map and deliver engagement within schools.

- 12 DEFRA are still producing guidance and information on links between LNRSs and other policies and delivery mechanisms. Further guidance on the linkage with Environmental Land Management (ELM) funding to farmers and landowner is amongst the guidance that is still outstanding.
- 13 A Regional Steering Group has been established that includes representatives from the 4 regional LNRSs, the relevant Government agencies, the Wildlife Trusts, and supporting authorities.
- 14 A Regional Stakeholder Sub-Group has been established to determine the potential benefits of a regional approach to engagement and consultation for specific consultees. Those consultees with a regional mandate may benefit from a more co-ordinated approach.
- 15 The role of this Regional Steering Group is to share information and learning and ensure that the 4 LNRSs are cognisant of each other and cross boundary opportunities for nature conservation are identified and incorporated in the LNRS.
- 16 A North East and Yorkshire LNRS Steering Group has been established with a similar remit and role to the Regional Steering Group.
- 17 Monthly meetings have been established with Natural England to monitor progress against DEFRA milestones. DEFRA have produced a LNRS Progress Tracker and Action Log to track the progress of responsible authorities (RAs) against several performance indicators and indicative milestones as they prepare their LNRSs.
- 18 To date Durham County Council has met the targets within the Progress Tracker and Action Log.
- 19 Most of the work on the LNRS to date has focused on developing an approach to engagement and consultation.
- 20 The consultation will be a two-stage process with the first stage being used to inform the writing of the LNRS and a final consultation on a draft version.
- 21 The first stage of consultation will identify locations that are currently valued for nature and locations consultees believe could be improved for nature. The consultation will also seek to find out what broad groups of habitats and species consultees believe should be prioritised within the LNRS. This information will shape the draft LNRS.
- 22 A webpage is being developed as part of the Durham County Council website that will hold background information on the LNRS, provide a mechanism to deliver updates on progress and links to consultations.

- 23 The Council's Consultations Team and GIS Teams are helping to develop the consultation in conjunction with members of the Ecological Emergency Board.
- 24 The Ecological Emergency Board has produced a draft list of consultees that is due to be refined after a meeting of the Regional Steering Group.
- 25 This consultees list identifies key organisations and individuals that should be made aware of the LNRS and engaged with the process. The list of consultees ranges from Parish Councils and community groups through to business interests, developers, farmers, and conservation organisations.
- 26 It is appreciated that different consultees may require different approaches to engagement and consultation.
- 27 Meetings have been held with The Country Land and Business Association (CLA) and National Farmers Union (NFU) to discuss how best to approach the farming community and a workshop is planned with land agents to further inform the process.
- 28 The CLA and NFU have agreed that background information on the LNRS and a link to the Consultations webpage and LNRS webpage will be sent out to individuals on their database.
- 29 The Principal Ecologist attended the CLA Committee Meeting in October along with a representative of the North of Tyne LNRS to discuss the LNRS and how best to engage with the CLA and their members.
- 30 Identification of other farming clusters and organisations with an ability to reach farmers and landowners is on-going. An example is the Wear Rivers Trust who have offered to send out information and consultation links to their contacts in the farming industry.
- 31 Conservation organisations and individuals with specialist knowledge are to be engaged through direct involvement with writing the statement of priorities.
- 32 A schools engagement process is being developed alongside Children and Young Peoples Services and OASES. The current thinking is to have a broad coverage across the Area Action Partnerships with sessions targeting pupils across primary, special, and secondary schools. Activities will inspire pupils and draw out their understanding and experiences of nature in County Durham and their preferences for habitat improvements and connect with the latest nature related programmes from the Department for Education. Schools' engagement is planned for Spring 2024.

- 33 Initial, informal, conversations have been held with a housing developer around engagement and consultation with developers. These discussions will help inform our approach to engagement and consultation with this sector.
- 34 Initial, informal, conversations have been held with an ecological consultancy around engagement and consultation with ecological consultancies working in County Durham. These discussions will help inform our approach to engagement and consultation with this sector.
- 35 All residents of County Durham will be consulted on at both stages. The consultation and the LNRS website will be promoted via social media, County Council website, Durham County News magazine and other appropriate outlets.
- 36 The approach to consultation is still being refined in conjunction with Natural England, Environment Agency, Forestry Commission, and other responsible authorities.
- 37 Although most effort is currently directed towards consultation and engagement, there is other work around the mapping and statement of priorities taking place.
- 38 The 4 LNRSs in the North East have agreed that the Environmental Records Information Centre for the North East of England (ERIC) is best placed to deliver the local habitat map. ERIC have direct access to a substantial wildlife dataset and were involved with developing the habitat map for the Pilot LNRS in Northumberland in 2021. Using ERIC to deliver the mapping will help to ensure that the regional LNRSs can be read across boundaries and linkages across local areas can be easily identified.
- 39 Funding for ERIC to recruit additional staff and deliver the habitat map will come from DEFRA funding. The details of the funding requirement are to be confirmed.
- 40 ERIC and the Council's Ecology Team have established a working group and have begun to develop a mapping protocol that will inform future work on the habitat map.
- 41 Preparatory work has begun on the list of priority habitats and species for County Durham. The initial list will be based upon the list of priority habitats and species in England (under Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act) and the Durham Biodiversity Action Plan. The list will be refined through consultation.
- 42 Proposals to use sub-groups to help deliver the statement of priorities is currently being investigated. The proposal is to engage with specialist

individuals or organisations to lead sub-groups tasked with developing the actions and targets for priority species and habitats. For example, the Wear Rivers Trust could lead a sub-group to define the actions and targets around Rivers and Streams.

- 43 The Council has declared an Ecological Emergency and developed an Ecological Emergency Action Plan (EEAP). Although the EEAP concentrates on Council actions it will need to be aware of the developing LNRS, this is being achieved through the Ecological Emergency Delivery Plan Group which has a representative from the Ecology team leading on the LNRS attending.

Conclusion

- 44 Regional co-ordination is in place and the 4 LNRSs continue to work together to ensure regional cohesion.
- 45 The development of the LNRS continues to make steady progress, in line with DEFRA's timescales and expectations. Most efforts being currently directed towards developing the engagement and consultation strategy.

Background papers

- None

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

The council is legally obliged to deliver the LNRS.

Finance

None forecast at this stage, DEFRA funding has been provided to facilitate the LNRS.

Consultation

Not applicable at this stage

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Not applicable

Human Rights

Not applicable

Climate Change

Not applicable

Crime and Disorder

Not applicable

Staffing

Staffing resources have been increased partly to address the LNRS and other increases in workload arising from the Environment Act. No further staffing resources are expected at this stage.

Accommodation

Not applicable

Risk

Not applicable

Procurement

Not applicable