

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

22 November 2024

**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 (LNRS).

Executive summary

- 2 Durham County Council is the responsible authority tasked with production of a statutory plan to improve and better connect the biodiversity resource across the county through the production of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy. We are required to consult and engage with stakeholders and landowners as well as the wider public on its production.
- 3 The first round of consultation is completed and a suite of draft priorities and measures around the plan's delivery are being generated by a number of partnership-based sub-groups. A pro-forma for a Statement of Priorities has been drafted and presented to the government's watchdog for the LNRS process, Natural England, for comment. We are also engaging the Environmental and Records Information Centre for the North East (ERIC NE) to lead on discussions with the sub-groups as the starting point to developing the mapping element of the LNRS.

Recommendations

- 4 That the Environment & Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the contents of the report and welcome progress in the development of the LNRS.

Background

- 5 The LNRS is comprised of a habitat map that defines existing biodiversity resources and where further resources should be directed to deliver nature conservation alongside a Statement of Priorities which describes the LNRS area and identifies the end results that the strategy is seeking to achieve (Priorities) and specific practical actions to achieve them (Measures).
- 6 Thematic sub-groups have been established around species and habitats to determine these Priorities and Measures. The sub-groups are either lead by the County Council Ecologists or by partners on the county partnership's Ecological Emergency Board who have specialist knowledge relating to the work of that sub-group.
- 7 The sub-groups and the lead organisation are shown in the table below:

Sub-Group	Lead Organisation
Woodland, Hedgerows, Scrub & Trees	Forestry Commission
Grassland & Heathland	Durham Wildlife Trust
Running Waters and Wetlands	Wear Rivers Trust
Coastal	Durham County Council (Ecology /Heritage Coast)
Urban & Accessible Nature-Rich Green Space	Durham County Council (Clean and Green / Ecology)
Species	Durham County Council (Ecology)

- 8 The Species sub-groups cover Butterflies and Moths, Other Invertebrates, Reptiles, Birds, Plants, Mammals and Fish.
- 9 The sub-groups contained representatives from the public, private and charitable sectors as well as members of the public with specific

interests or specialist knowledge, for example; angling clubs attend the Fish sub-group and Durham Bird Club attend the Birds sub-group.

10 The County Council has been designated by DEFRA as the 'Responsible Authority' for the preparation of the strategy and therefore sits on all the sub-groups alongside Natural England.

11 A series of draft Priorities have been produced for the LNRS and agreed by Natural England, although these are yet to be signed off by the Ecological Emergency Board (EEB) and so remain unofficial at this stage. Draft Measures have also been produced and are under final review by the sub-groups with an expectation that these will be agreed by the end of November ready for final sign-off by the EEB.

12 The Draft Habitat Priorities are as follows:

Broad Habitat Type & Priority Reference	Draft Priority
Grassland & Heathland	
G1	Priority grasslands are protected, enhanced, extended and connected.
G3	Heathlands are protected, enhanced, extended and connected.
G4	Open Mosaic Habitats are protected, enhanced, extended and connected.
G5	Peatlands are restored to be in good hydrological and biological condition
Woodland, hedgerows and Veteran Trees	
W1	Ancient Woodlands and ancient and veteran trees are protected, enhanced, extended and connected, with Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites actively restored.
W2	The area of native woodland is increased
W3	All woodland types are managed appropriately to enhance their biodiversity and their wider ecosystem services
W4	Native hedgerows are conserved, managed and enhanced, and new species rich native hedgerows with hedgerow trees are created.
Running waters and wetlands	
RW1	Water quality is improved with a reduction in pollutants

RW2	Modified and artificial river habitats are restored
RW3	Ponds, Fens, Swamps are protected, enhanced, extended and connected.
RW4	The distribution and abundance of Invasive Non-Native Species are sustainably reduced.
Urban	
U1	There is greater range and abundance of wildlife in the urban environment which is protected, positively managed, and better connected across the urban landscape.
Coastal	
C1	Recreational access to the coast is improved and sustainably managed, minimising impacts on local wildlife and the environment.

13 The Draft Species Priorities are as follows:

Species Group & Priority Reference	Draft Priority
Butterflies and Moths	
BM1	Populations of Northern Brown Argus are secured and their connectivity and distribution increased.
BM2	Populations of Small Pearl-Bordered Fritillary are secured and their connectivity and distribution increased.
Bumblebees	
BB1	Populations of Moss Carder Bee are secured and their distribution increased.
BB2	Populations of Broken-Belted Bumblebee are secured and their distribution increased.
Birds	-
BR1	Populations of Willow Tit are secured and their distribution increased.
BR2	Populations of Black Grouse are secured and their distribution increased.
BR3	Populations of the Breeding Wader Assemblage are secured and their distribution increased
BR4	Populations of the Lowland Farmland Bird Assemblage are secured and their distribution increased
Reptiles	

R1	Populations of Adder are secured and their distribution increased.
Fish	
F1	An increase in self-sustaining populations of the Fish Assemblage
Plants	
P1	Populations of the Upland Alchemilla Assemblage are secured and their distribution increased
P2	Populations of Flat-sedge secured and the distribution increased
P3	Populations of Northern Hawk's-beard are secured and the distribution increased
P4	Populations of Ivy-leaved Bellflower are secured and the distribution increased
Mammals	
M1	Populations of water voles are secured and their distribution increased.
M2	Populations of red squirrel are secured and their distribution increased

14 The wading bird assemblage includes lapwing, snipe, redshank, golden plover and curlew.

15 The lowland farmland bird assemblage includes yellowhammer, corn bunting, grey partridge, tree sparrow, linnet, reed bunting, yellow wagtail and skylark.

16 The fish assemblage includes sea trout, salmon, eel, lamprey and sea, river and brook lamprey.

17 The upland Alchemilla assemblage includes starry lady's mantle, clustered lady's mantle, velvet lady's mantle, large-toothed lady's mantle and rock lady's mantle.

18 There is on-going discussion within the species sub-groups around including further species including slowworm and an assemblage of day-flying moths.

19 Overarching Draft Priorities are proposed and are as follows:

Theme	Draft Priority
Connectivity	
CC1	Enhance habitat connectivity and species' ability to cross the landscape
Recording	
RE1	Encourage the recording of under-represented taxonomic groups (e.g. invertebrates) and seek to increase number of people who can confidently identify these under recorded groups

20 ERIC NE is leading on the mapping element of the LNRS and is working on establishing baseline models to determine patch size, dispersal distances and habitat resistance values which will inform how the mapping identifies opportunities nature recovery.

21 Models used by Somerset County Council and the Yorkshire Dales National Park alongside Natural England's England Habitat Network are currently being used to help inform the process.

22 Once the baseline model and rules are established, we can begin to refine these across the range of habitats that the LNRS is prioritising.

23 Meetings with the various sub-group leads with ERIC NE are being set up to ensure that ERIC NE understands the developing draft Priorities and Measures whilst it develops the baseline model and rules.

24 The first round of consultation to inform the Draft Priorities and Measures has been completed with the following workshops having been undertaken:

- Land Agent workshops
- Farmer and Landowner Workshops
- County Councillor Workshops
- Parish Council Workshops
- Area Action Partnership Workshops

25 A public consultation process was also undertaken in April 2024 involving an on-line and paper consultation promoted by social media information and a dedicated LNRS page on the Council website.

26 There was a total of 237 responses with 169 locations (that are either valued for nature or could be improved for nature) shared by the public.

27 Residents were asked which habitats they felt were the most important, and woodlands was the most popular choice as well as which species they thought were the most important. Hedgehogs, birds and butterflies were voted the most popular choice.

A consultation was sent out directly by email to over 400 individuals and organisations ranging from community groups, developers, quarry companies, conservation groups and wildlife recorders and specialists.

28 Additionally, the National Farmers Union and Country Land and Business Association sent out a consultation to all their members.

29 Pupils from of 55 schools across the county have been asked for their views on nature recovery. The key outcome from this engagement was that schoolchildren are only aware of the nature on their doorstep, and this was especially the case for pupils in urban areas.

Timeline and next steps

30 Nationally, DEFRA has relaxed the timescales for production of the LNRS as the earlier deadline of production by spring 2025 are regarded as being unattainable. DEFRA are expecting the LNRS process to extend into late 2025.

31 Given the current pace of work, it is envisaged that the Priorities and Measures will be completed and signed off by the Ecological Emergency Board by the end of the year.

32 A more realistic timescale for the final production of the LNRS is autumn 2025, this is comparable with neighbouring LNRS timescales including North Yorkshire and South of Tyne and Wear LNRS.

33 Once the priorities and measures are signed off and the pro-forma agreed with Natural England, work can start on the Statement of Priorities. Some early work describing the National Character Areas (NCA) found in County Durham has already been undertaken as part of the Statement of Priorities. NCAs are distinct areas defined by landscape, ecology, geodiversity and cultural and economic activity and by using NCA as a common language between neighbouring LNRS we can help ensure the strategies read across county boundaries.

34 Meetings with ERIC NE and neighbouring responsible authorities are regular and on-going to ensure that the mapping can effectively cross local authority boundaries ensuring that the LNRS function cohesively.

National Policy Changes

35 There are no known policy changes at a national level that will impact the LNRS.

Delivery of action post-production of the LNRS

36 Meetings have been held with DEFRA to discuss the delivery of the LNRS once it is produced and the role of Durham County Council as the Responsible Authority (RA). These discussions are at an early stage with no firm commitments in place as yet.

37 Durham County Council has been in early discussions with neighbouring Responsible Authorities over the delivery of the LNRS and we have also had initial discussions with partners around the potential to develop landscape scale projects based on the LNRS Priorities and Measures. These conversations will continue into next year and become more focused as the LNRS nears completion.

Conclusion

38 The development of the LNRS continues to make steady progress, with the Statement of Priorities starting to take shape with Priorities and Measures almost complete.

39 DEFRA is more relaxed about the delivery timescales and the expectation is that the LNRS will be complete in autumn 2025.

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