

Update on Local Nature Recovery Strategy

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Cabinet Member: Cllr Sarah Dyke

Division and Local Member: All

1. Summary

- 1.1.** This report is to update the Environment Scrutiny Committee on the progress of the development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS); a new policy instrument of the Environment Act (2021), for which, in Somerset, Somerset Council will be the 'Responsible Authority'.
- 1.2.** The purpose of LNRS's is to help reverse the ongoing decline of biodiversity in England by driving greater consideration of and planning for the action needed for nature to recover; providing the foundation of a national Nature Recovery Network

2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations

- 2.1.** Members are asked to consider and note the update.

3. Background

- 3.1.** Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) 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 to develop these Strategies was established upon the passing of the Environment Act (2021).

- 3.2.** The area covered by each Local Nature Recovery Strategy is to be set by the Defra Secretary of State, who is also responsible for appointing a "Responsible Authority" for each to lead its preparation. Somerset County Council will act as the initial Responsible Authority, which will then revert to Somerset Council upon vesting.

The Defra Secretary of State is yet to produce regulations on the process for preparing, publishing, reviewing and republication of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy and guidance on what each Strategy should contain.

- 3.3.** It is envisaged that Local Nature Recovery Strategies will be a powerful new tool that will help the public, private and voluntary sectors work more effectively

together for nature's recovery and enable collective effort to be focussed where it will have most benefit. Key to achieving this will be creating genuine local collaboration with a partnership of organisations and individuals working closely with each "responsible authority".

3.4. Each Strategy will, for the area that it covers;

- agree priorities for nature's recovery,
- map the most valuable existing areas for nature
- map specific proposals for creating or improving habitat for nature and wider environmental goals.

The production of each Local Nature Recovery Strategy will be evidence-based, locally led and collaborative, to create a network of shared plans that public, private and voluntary sectors can all help to deliver.

This will provide a locally owned foundation to developing and underpinning the Nature Recovery Network; identifying the places which, once action has been taken on the ground, will enable the Network to grow over time. This in turn will help achieve wider environmental objectives (like carbon sequestration to mitigate climate change or managing flood risk) and contribute to green economic recovery objectives.

3.5. As the leads for the development and delivery of the Natural Environment and Farming and Food sectors of the Climate Emergency Strategy, it was thought that the Somerset Local Nature Partnership (LNP) would be best placed in supporting taking forward preliminary work on the LNRS and a bespoke sub-group of the LNP was convened to take the initial work forward.

Membership of this group consists primarily of organisations with environmental responsibility and expertise relevant to Somerset, alongside officers from both the County and District Councils, including the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Exmoor National Park.

3.6. Although definitive guidance for the content and process of the development of the LNRSs is still awaited from DEFRA and Natural England, work is progressing based upon the ambitions set out within the Act and also building upon the models and learning of the initial pilots that were run in Cornwall, Cumbria, Buckinghamshire, Greater Manchester and Northumberland run between August 2020 and May 2021

3.7. A small amount of funding has been received by Somerset County Council as the designated Responsible Authority via a Section 31 grant (£16,304.35) – these monies are being used to fund this initial work.

3.8. Although we are still awaiting guidance on the content of the Strategy, Natural England have given advice on what LNRSs are not expected to do;

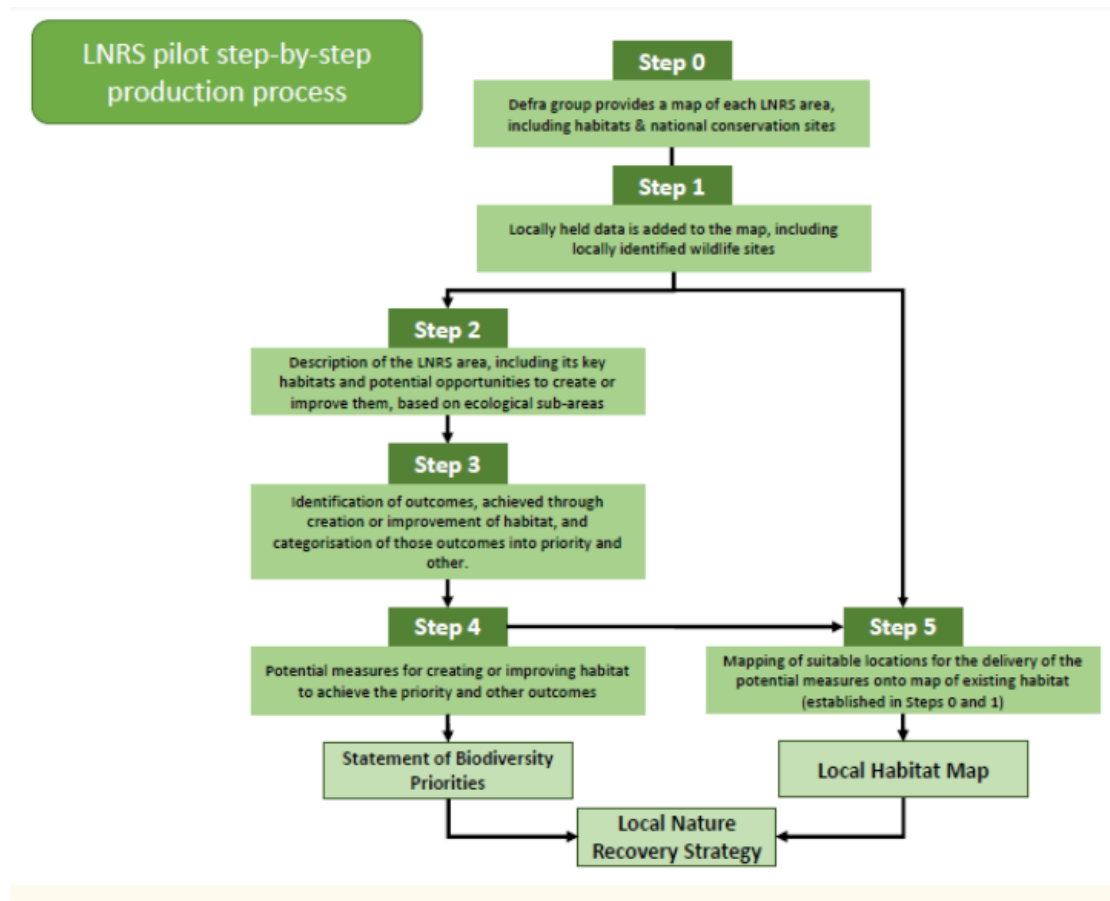
- Not be delivery plans but a mechanism through which other measures and interventions may be delivered
- Strategy and proposed actions are not be binding – Responsible Authorities must prepare a LNRS but are not required to deliver the opportunities identified. They must, however, be reviewed and republished to enable progress on delivery to be monitored and allow reflection on what has been achieved
- Not have binding lines on maps that confer any level of protection or prevent land uses such as intensive farming or development. They do however indicate areas of opportunity that will guide and inform planning and nature recovery activities
- Do not give permission to create habitat without consulting specialists in Historic Environment, Landscape, Access etc.

3.9. There will however be measures that will encourage LNRS delivery. These include, for example;

- Mandatory 10% Biodiversity Net Gain with a possible (but not yet confirmed through regulation) uplift in the calculation of biodiversity units providing an incentive to focus on sites identified by the LNRS
- A new, strengthened duty on public authorities to conserve and enhance biodiversity which includes a requirement to 'have regard' to relevant LNRSs
- Clear signposting from Government to explain the role of LNRSs in planning
- LNRSs are expected to play a role in the spatial prioritisation of the LNR scheme (part of the ELM Future Schemes)
- Peat Strategies – funding through Nature for Climate Fund, targets to deliver 35,000 hectares of peatland restoration over the next 5 years nationally
- Tree Strategy – funding through Nature for Climate Fund. Prioritising sites for tree planting and forest restoration with over £600M allocated to tree planting (beyond ELM) nationally
- Flood Resilience Fund – working with local flood authorities to deliver natural flood management and coastal realignment.

3.10. Outline Approach

Although definitive guidance has yet to be received, an outline approach to the development of the LNRS has been produced by DEFRA as part of the pilot programme. Work has commenced on the draft Somerset LNRS based upon the principles of the delivery of the two overarching themes.



3.11. Progress

Led by the LNP, work has commenced on the habitat mapping and biodiversity priority identification under a number of themes and these two elements will be closely interlinked in the final output.

Timelines are yet to be fixed due to the lack of guidance but it is anticipated that the thematic groups will have completed much of the scoping work by April 2023 in order to allow time for final consultation, prioritisation and sign off – assuming the original deadlines for completion are adhered to (end 2023)

3.12. Local Habitat Map

The first step of developing a habitat map has been largely completed by staff at Somerset Environmental Records Centre and Somerset Wildlife Trust. This includes National Conservation sites, Nature Reserves, other areas of particular importance for biodiversity and areas where biodiversity recovery could contribute to other environmental benefits.

A draft map is available and is under consultation by the dedicated sub-group to ensure it is as comprehensive as possible. It will in due course be a living, updateable and interactive resource available to the public and other interested parties - there has been discussion around how to engage stakeholders with the mapping resource to ensure that it will be accessible to a range of different audiences for different purposes.

3.13. Statement of Biodiversity Priorities

A key action for the LNRS development is to describe the strategy area and its biodiversity, identify and propose opportunities for nature and biodiversity recovery, prioritise those opportunities and point to measures that relate to the delivery of priorities.

The process of priority identification commenced with a stakeholder workshop at the end of September 2022 attended by environmental professionals and groups from across the county as well as Natural England representatives. Workshop attendees were asked to identify outcomes and environmental benefits or services that they would like to see as a result of this exercise for each of the theme areas. Activities to help delivery of the strategy were also suggested by participants. The output of the workshop is currently being analysed and will be provided to each thematic group as a starting point for further consultation and expansion.

- 3.14.** As mentioned above, guidance from Natural England and DEFRA is still awaited with regard to the regulations, statutory guidance and timeline of the Strategy development and adoption. Officers from the Somerset Local Authorities alongside members of the LNP recently met with an officer from Natural England who was unable to provide any assurances around the timescales, however, it is still envisaged that the Strategies will need to be in place by the end of 2023.

The delays are due to the inability of DEFRA to get the regulations and guidance before parliament due to the recent turnover of the Ministerial Team; whilst they were unable to confirm exact timescales "*the team are continuing to work at pace to get the national framework, including regulations and statutory guidance, in place as soon as possible.*"

- 3.15.** A brief update will be provided to this Committee upon the confirmation and receipt of the regulations and guidance.

3.16. Other Considerations

Local Authority officers are acutely aware of the potential competing demands for land in Somerset and the outputs of the LNRS must feed into the overall planning

to enable informed and strategic decisions for future land use.

The need for nature recovery, food security, flood risk management, renewable, sustainable energy production, economic and housing development, nutrient neutrality issues and Biodiversity Net Gain from development must be considered holistically and the development and outputs of the LNRS must not be thought of in isolation.

Officers involved in the development of the LNRS must and will be involved in the development of the new Local Plan for Somerset Council to ensure that all of the above considerations are transparent, understood and taken into account.

4. Consultations undertaken

- 4.1.** A wide-ranging, multi-agency, cross-authority group has been established and engaged in the development work so far.

Representatives from organisations such as Somerset Wildlife Trust, Somerset Environmental Records Service, Natural England, the Environment Agency, the Somerset Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the Somerset District Councils, the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, the RSPB, FWAG South West, the NFU have all been involved in the scoping work, habitat mapping and biodiversity prioritisation work.

5. Background papers

- 5.1.** N/A

Note For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author