

to

<b>Bath &amp; North East Somerset Council</b>		
MEETING/ DECISION MAKER:	<b>Climate Emergency and Sustainability Policy Development &amp; Scrutiny Panel</b>	
MEETING/ DECISION DATE:	<b>9 November 2023</b>	EXECUTIVE FORWARD PLAN REFERENCE: <i>[Cabinet reports only]</i>
TITLE:	<b>Update on the Ecological Emergency Action Plan (EEAP) and the West of England Local Nature Recovery Strategy</b>	
WARD:	All	
<b>AN OPEN PUBLIC ITEM</b>		
<b>List of attachments to this report:</b>  Annex 1: Ecological Emergency Action Plan  Annex 2: Green Infrastructure Prospectus		

## 1 THE ISSUES

Since publication of the Ecological Emergency Action Plan earlier this year, we have made good progress in delivery of many of the actions contained within the Plan, and we have multiple projects and proposals underway to help increase the abundance of species and extent of land and water managed for nature. The Green Infrastructure Prospectus attached as an annex to this report demonstrates some of these projects.

However, in common with all other local authorities, it is difficult to know if we are on track to reverse the decline in wildlife by 2030. In part, this is down to a lack of good quality data, which we are working to address at a regional level, but is also due to the majority of the action needed to recover nature being outside of our direct control (e.g. agricultural policy). These issues are explained in the Report section below.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs) 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’, as set out by Government in the Environment Act 2021. The West of England Combined Authority (CA) has been designated as the Responsible Authority for the production of the West of England LNRS (including North Somerset), and has procured support from B&NES Council (through the Nature Recovery Manager role) for its production. Once published, the LNRS will help target and focus action and investment for nature recovery, including biodiversity net gain funding.

Through the recently updated NERC Duty the council must complete a *first consideration* of the action it takes for the enhancement of species and habitats through the delivery of its services by 1<sup>st</sup> January 2024. Both the EEAP and the LNRS can be used to help demonstrate the actions we are taking.

## 2 RECOMMENDATION

### The Panel is asked to:

- 2.1 To note the positive progress in delivery of the Ecological Emergency Action Plan since its publication in March 2023.
- 2.2 To note the resource constraints within the GI & Nature Recovery Team that have meant delivery of the Action Plan has needed to be targeted towards the most important and feasible actions.
- 2.3 To note that the ambition on nature recovery contained in the Ecological Emergency Action Plan will only be fully realised with additional investment and through working in partnership.
- 2.4 To note the progress in producing a West of England Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), which will state and map priorities for nature recovery in the region and will be used to direct public and private funding for nature recovery towards agreed strategic priorities.
- 2.5 To note that officers will be completing a first consideration of the actions the council is taking for biodiversity to comply with the updated Biodiversity Duty

## 3 THE REPORT

### 3.1 Ecological Emergency Action Plan

#### Background

The Ecological Emergency Action Plan was published in March 2023 in response to the Ecological Emergency Declaration made in 2020.

In the Plan we set out three broad strategic priorities to guide action for BANES to deliver the transformation required to become 'Nature Positive by 2030':

- increase the extent of land and waterways managed positively for nature across B&NES
- increase the abundance and distribution of key species across B&NES
- enable more people to access and engage with nature

The plan presents a series of strategic outcomes needed for the Council to achieve a step change by 2030, along with the immediate actions that we will take to progress these. These actions will help us to:

- mainstream nature recovery in decision-making, ensuring that we are having a positive impact on nature across all service areas;
- commit to manage our own landholdings, across a range of services, in a way that actively supports nature recovery;
- deliver more for nature from existing projects ie Bathscape, Waterscape, Bath Riverline, Chew Valley Reconnected and Somer Valley Rediscovered;
- pursue more external investment, and establish a prospectus for investment;
- improve communities' access to and engagement with nature; and

- Improve our evidence base and monitoring of the state of nature in B&NES.

In the Ecological Emergency Action Plan Executive Summary (Annex 1), we have included a table of 10 priority actions, which have been chosen due to their potential to make a particularly significant contribution to nature recovery.

### Progress

Since publication, we have focused our efforts on the priority actions and those that we have set out to deliver in 2023. Some of the most important progress is as follows:

- We have proactively engaged with the development of the Council-wide decision support tool to ensure potential impacts on nature inform all major decisions and projects across the Council.
- We are working closely with the Planning Team to ensure policies and guidance in the new Local Plan address the ecological emergency and improve access to nature.
- We have submitted plans for nature recovery on Odd Down Sports Ground to the Leisure Team, and are looking at a potential joint renewables-nature project at Lansdown.
- The Parks and Green Spaces team have received additional funding to enhance the nature-richness of parks and green spaces through the WECA pollinator fund.
- We have developed guidance and a template for 'Parish/Town Nature Action Plans', helping local parish and town councils to take the lead on local action for nature.
- Bristol Avon Rivers Trust will shortly publish an Action Plan for the River Chew, which we will support delivery of through the newly-formed Chew Valley Reconnected Partnership.
- We have worked with Avon Wildlife Trust to secure funding for a post to engage communities on managing green space for nature in the Somer Valley.
- We have surveyed our largest Sites of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCl) within B&NES to identify those that lack management plans or are in unfavourable condition.
- We have published an Ecological Emergency webpage on the Council website.
- We are working with the Parks and Green Spaces team to develop a B&NES Tree and Woodland Strategy for council-owned trees and woodlands.
- We have rolled out a 'Call for Nature Sites', through which landowners can submit sites on which they are interested in taking action for nature, and enabling us to match them with funding to do so.
- Our Strategic GI Projects (Bathscape, Chew Valley Reconnected, Somer Valley Rediscovered and WaterSpace) continue to be a key vehicle for local delivery of our ambitions for nature and people.

### Next steps

We will continue to progress on delivering the Action Plan, with a focus on the priority actions. Developing 'Ecological Literacy Training' (similar to the Climate Literacy Training already available) is something we would like to progress as a priority, to ensure that the decision-making tool is complemented by improved knowledge of what is meant by the ecological emergency and what is needed to tackle it.

We are also focusing on engaging with the Local Plan, given its importance for land use in the region.

Our capacity should be improved by the recruitment of a 'Nature Recovery Officer' post, although the need to finalise the Local Nature Recovery Strategy by June 2026 will mean that the Nature Recovery Manager will need to focus on this until the Spring.

### **3.2 Local Nature Recovery Strategy**

#### **Background**

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', as set out by Government in the Environment Act 2022.

As well as having a role in the planning system and directing public funding for nature recovery, LNRSs will inform the delivery of 'nature-based solutions' for outcomes such as flood management, carbon sequestration and improvements in water quality.

There will be a single LNRS for the West of England which will cover the unitary authority areas of Bath and North East Somerset (B&NES), Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire. In total, there will be around 50 LNRSs, covering the whole of England; joined together, the aim is that they will support delivery of a national Nature Recovery Network.

The West of England Local Nature Recovery Strategy will identify desired outcomes for nature recovery in the region, including those considered to be 'priorities', and potential measures to deliver them. Ultimately, we see the LNRS as being the guiding strategy for nature in the region, enabling collective effort to be focussed where it will have most benefit.

#### **Governance**

The West of England Combined Authority has been designated as the 'Responsible Authority' for delivery of the LNRS in the West of England, which means that it will be responsible for ensuring the LNRS is produced in line with the forthcoming guidance and regulation from DEFRA. The four UAs in the region and Natural England are designated as Supporting Authorities, which means they are being especially closely engaged in the production of the LNRS.

The Natural Environment Officer Steering Group (NEOSG), which comprises senior officers from UAs, the CA, Natural England, West of England Nature Partnership (WENP), and the BACP, is providing Project Governance and Oversight. A Steering Group consisting of UA officers with appropriate expertise, in addition to Natural England, WENP and BACP is working with the LNRS Project Manager more closely on its production.

In addition, the WENP Board is being used to help set the strategic direction and priorities, and guide the content for the LNRS.

#### **Progress**

We have collated and analysed our existing knowledge on the state of nature in the West of England to identify areas of particular importance for biodiversity and opportunities to restore nature. This has included using existing strategies and plans such as the Forest of Avon Plan, West of England Nature Recovery Network, Bristol Avon Catchment Plan, and Local Authorities' Green Infrastructure Strategies, among many others.

As well as working closely with numerous stakeholders (including through the West of England Nature Partnership and Bristol Avon Catchment Partnership), we are engaging with communities, businesses, and farmers and landholders to help shape the development of the LNRS. This has already included:

- A survey aimed at communities and residents in the West of England, which closed in September.
- A 'call for evidence' for existing information and research on people's priorities for nature recovery in the region, which we are in the process of analysing.

- A survey asking farmers and landholders for their thoughts on priorities for nature and how the LNRS could be made most useful for them.
- Three in-person events where we have spoken to farmers and landholders.

This engagement will be used to inform a first draft of priorities for nature recovery in the West of England and mapping of 'areas that could become of particular importance' for nature recovery, which we aim to be ready by the end of November 2023.

Concurrently, we are working on developing an interactive mapping portal that will be used to host the LNRS, enabling users to easily identify what the priorities for nature are for them locally.

We will also be holding a public consultation on the draft LNRS in Spring 2024, for which we will provide more detail closer to the time.

## **4 STATUTORY CONSIDERATIONS**

- 4.1 The Council's implementation of the Ecological Emergency Action Plan contributes to the enhanced Biodiversity Duty for Public Authorities set out in the Environment Act.
- 4.2 The LNRS is a statutory requirement set out in the Environment Act, with the West of England Combined Authority designated as the Responsible Authority for its delivery, and all Unitary Authorities in the West of England (including B&NES Council) designated as Supporting Authorities.

## **5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCE, PROPERTY, PEOPLE)**

- 5.1 There are no direct resource implications from this report.

## **6 RISK MANAGEMENT**

- 6.1 A risk assessment related to the issue and recommendations has been undertaken, in compliance with the Council's decision making risk management guidance.
- 6.2 A key risk for delivery of the Ecological Emergency Action Plan is a lack of resource within the Green Transformation Service to deliver the level of ambition within the Plan, especially considering the capacity taken up by development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

## **7 EQUALITIES**

7.1 No adverse impacts have been identified in relation to equalities groups or protected characteristics under Equalities legislation. Access to nature has been identified as a key priority for our work responding to the ecological emergency, with an emphasis in increasing social justice in access to natural greenspace. Actions linked to green social prescribing will have positive impacts for people experiencing limiting health conditions

## **8 CLIMATE CHANGE**

8.1 This package of work directly takes forward the Council's commitments in relation to the Ecological Emergency declared in 2020; many of the actions also help to deliver our ambitions in relation to climate change and net zero.

## 9 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

9.1 The development of both the Climate and Ecological Emergency plans has involved working across many Council services to identify and consider options for action on our net zero and nature positive 2030 goals. We will continue to explore options for further action and build these into future plans.

## 10 CONSULTATION

- The Ecological Emergency Action Plan was developed with input from local environmental groups and residents, including a stakeholder workshop and a webinar held in September as part of the Council's annual Climate and Nature Festival.
- The Ecological Emergency Action Plan was subject to early engagement with the PDS panel in October last year.
- We have engaged with B&NES Parish and Town Councils to develop guidance and a template for Parish & Town Nature Action Plans, which we are rolling out currently.
- We use regular questions in the Voicebox survey to track community views nature action.
- The Ecological Emergency Action Plan was reviewed by the Corporate Management Team and have sign off from the Chief Executive, the S151 Officer and the Monitoring Officer.
- We are undertaking significant stakeholder engagement to inform the LNRS, including with communities, businesses, and farmers and landholders.
- The LNRS will be subject to statutory consultation in Spring 2024.

<b>Contact person</b>	Stuart Gardner Stuart_gardner@bathnes.gov.uk
<b>Background papers</b>	Annex 1: Ecological Emergency Action Plan Annex 2: Green Infrastructure Prospectus
<b>Please contact the report author if you need to access this report in an alternative format</b>	