

## Environment & Energy Board

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<b>Report title</b>	WM2041 Natural Capital Projects and Programmes
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### Recommendation(s) for action or decision:

#### The Environment & Energy Board is recommended to:

- (1) Agree to review the draft access to green space report produced by New Economics Foundation and to provide input and feedback into the findings.
- (2) Identify ways to work with the findings from the report.
- (3) Support the search for funding for community green grants and their implementation.
- (4) Advise on routes for West Midlands National Park engagement within the local authorities.
- (5) Provide links to key programmes of activity/ influential stakeholders that should be engaged with the West Midlands National Park programme.

- (6) Identify routes to help promote the Virtual Forest website and engage with the project.
- (7) Engage colleagues within their organisation to retrospectively add any tree planting to the total from January 2020.
- (8) Share tree planting plans for the 2020/21 season so they can be supported through the Virtual Forest platform.
- (9) Identify a target for tree planting up until the end of 2021 for each local authority.

## 1. Purpose

- 1.1 Natural capital has long been understood as having an important role in physical and emotional wellbeing, as well as in mitigating, and adapting to, the effects of climate change. This has been brought into sharp relief in recent months where access to high quality green space has played a critical role in wellbeing during Covid-19. However, access to this type of green space is not even across the UK, nor in the West Midlands, with people that typically live in deprived areas having less available to them. As part of the WMCA green recovery plan, and the WM2041 climate change plans, we have committed to redressing this through region-wide initiatives and this paper covers three of these: 1) a study on access to green space undertaken by the New Economics Foundation; 2) the West Midlands National Park; and 3) the Virtual Forest.

## 2. Background

- 2.1 We know there are considerable benefits to natural capital for physical and mental health, as well as for mitigation and adaptation to climate change. The UK National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA), funded by the Natural Environment Research Council, estimates the health benefits of living with a view of a green space are worth up to £300 per person per year, and that increasing green spaces could reduce rainwater run-off and urban flooding which costs around £270 million a year in England and Wales. We also know that people value green space, with 3 out of 4 people in England (76%) supporting the suggestion that nature could contribute to the economic recovery from Covid-19 (*RSPB: Recovering together: A report of public opinion on the role and importance of nature during and in our recovery from the Coronavirus crisis in England*).
- 2.2 Research by Fields in Trust, using the 2020 Green Space Index, finds there is the equivalent of 32.94 square metres (sqm) of publicly accessible park and green space provision per person in Great Britain. But, as population increases, by 2040 this figure will reduce by 7.57% to 30.44 sqm per person. In the West Midlands, this same data shows significant variation across the Combined Authority area in terms of access to green space and, by 2040, the data is showing that the West Midlands will fall below the minimum standard of provision. Further, recent research by the RSPB shows that 'people in the UK with an annual household income under £10,000 are 3.6 times more likely to have no outdoor space where they live, and about 40% less likely to live within a 10-minute walk of any publicly accessible natural greenspace than people with a household income of £60,000 or more'.
- 2.3 The projects presented as part of this report, and to the Environment and Energy Board meeting, are seeking to redress these inequalities and improve access to high quality green space for all people in the West Midlands Combined Authority. They range from community level projects, through to new visions for how we create our places that take account of landscape and industrial heritage.

## 2.4 Access to green space: work with the New Economics Foundation

The data referenced in 2.2 above indicates the inequality that exists in relation to accessing green space. This research has largely been undertaken through a national lens, thereby missing the detailed picture that exists locally and regionally. In order to understand what the sub-national situation looks like, the WMCA has commissioned the New Economics Foundation (NEF) to explore this data at a regional level. The aim is to further understand where there has been deficit of access to quality green space during Covid-19 lockdown with evidence that can support the targeting of programmes around natural capital and widening access. This builds on the commitment made in *WM2041: a programme for implementing an environmental recovery*, to identify a source of funding to support the roll out of community green grants as part of the regional green recovery from Covid-19.

2.5 As part of the work on widening access to green space, we identified the need to do the following:

- To provide an overview on the access people have to green space across the West Midlands Combined Authority area.
- To identify the neighbourhoods with low levels of access to green space.
- To work with the WMCA local authorities to supplement national data with locally gathered information.
- To provide analysis of this data so that we have a spatial overview of the West Midlands position.
- To understand good practice from other places in the UK and internationally that address the challenges of access to green space.
- To support the development of a proposal aimed at decision-makers and funders, based on the data gathered, to highlight where intervention should be made.

2.6 In response to these requirements, the NEF study began with desk-based research of publicly available data to develop an understanding of the demography across the West Midlands at a regional and local level, including some key socio-economic characteristics, for example ethnicity, age and income. It is important to note that the project has been limited by the quality and type of data available at the spatial level required. In addition to this, a number of data sources have been used to explore the levels and use of green space in the West Midlands e.g. Ordnance Survey Open Greenspace maps, ONS Access to gardens and public green space in Great Britain data release, and the Fields in Trust Green Space Index. Scoping interviews were offered to all the constituent local authorities to contextualise the data identified in the desk-based research and understand more about the communities.

2.7 Following the initial data gathering, the study has analysed the data gathered to understand how the proximity to green spaces, quality of the green spaces and how the amount of green space publicly available impacts on accessibility. It has also explored the relationship between green spaces and several socio-economic factors at MSOA or LSOA level to produce maps indicating where there is lack of access, due to distance or population pressure, based on a range of socio-economic characteristics.

- 2.8 The study has also provided a review of academic and grey literature to identify examples of successful interventions that address the challenges of access to green space from the UK and around the world. The research recognises that there is already a considerable amount of work happening across the West Midlands, but draws on other examples globally, and across the UK, to provide added insight.
- 2.9 The work undertaken to understand access to green space at a regional level has attracted considerable interest from environmental NGOs, as well as from Defra. The roll out of community green grants was part of the 'natural capital infrastructure' ask within the recent Comprehensive Spending Review submission and the WMCA Environment Team is continuing work to identify funding sources for this activity.
- 2.10 Recommendations for the Board:
- Agree to review the draft report produced by NEF and to provide input and feedback into the findings.
  - Identify ways to work with the findings from the report
  - Support the search for funding for community green grants and their implementation.
- 2.11 **West Midlands National Park**  
The West Midlands National Park is a concept, developed and led by Birmingham City University, that unites the people of the West Midlands with their landscape, culture and heritage. Its purpose is to create a better quality of life, jobs and environment for the future with thriving, healthy and resilient communities. It has been featured in the UK Government's Landscape Review and backed by many local stakeholders. It resonates with the region's climate emergency response, WM2041, as well as with our 'brownfield first' approach to development, and the principles outlined in the Design Charter around local distinctiveness, climate resilience, wellbeing and stewardship.
- 2.12 The aim is for the West Midlands National Park to result in a region-wide spatial vision; provide an overarching context for a range of WMCA and post-Covid recovery interventions; and a roadmap to increased and inclusive regional prosperity, spatial and environmental justice and growth.
- 2.13 Potential West National Park projects might include:
- Sequences of parks and squares connecting communities across and through the West Midlands to create a walkable region.
  - Publicly accessible clean rivers, streams and working floodplains to walk and cycle along, and the start of long-distance journeys to the UK coast.
  - The sight and sound of nature all around, clean air, limited traffic, extensive garden and street planting, forests and woodlands to define the region.
  - Housing/development designed to exploit views, horizons, skylines and inherent beauty of the region (for future lockdowns).
  - Celebration of regional food, through allotments and urban agriculture networks, local food markets.
  - Networks of local supplies, shops, working places and circular economies.
  - Projects demonstrating carbon capture, the storage, cleansing and purification of flood and storm water.

2.14 There has been some thinking by Birmingham City University on what some of the initial projects might be and they are considering the following:

- **A plan for using parks as part of the regional recovery from Covid-19.** This has four elements to it:
  - Creating alternative futures for Birmingham City Centre. This would be a collaborative study to inform the radical rethink of the purpose, scope and economic viability of dense city centres in a post-Covid economy, climate emergency and the urgent need to kick start a green recovery.
  - The Knowledge District, including The Birmingham Central Park. Developing a spatial strategy for a Birmingham Central Park, the creation of the Knowledge District and the relationship of HS2 Curzon Street with its environment, all in the context of its canal and river network.
  - Birmingham National Ring Parks. This project will develop the economic case and the spatial strategy for the Birmingham National Ring Park; a green, healthy alternative to the notorious ring roads that encircle our cities, starting with Birmingham.
  - The WM City Centre Parks. Building on the success of the Black Country Urban Park and the Black Country Garden City, the WM Central Parks project will create a strategy for a series of central parks in each major city of the West Midlands.
- **A vision for the region's waterways.** Development of a vision for canal and river navigations, including the green energy and social agendas etc.
- **A spatial strategy for the Tame Valley and HS2.** A strategy to improve Multiple Deprivation Indices, encouraging integrated working and holistic solutions, bringing different disciplines, external investment and expertise together to achieve more whilst lifting aspirations and design quality.

2.15 Potential outcomes from the projects could include:

- Job opportunities and other purposeful activity associated with stewardship and activity around the WMNP projects and assets.
- Improved resilience to flooding and a reduction in the urban heat island effect.
- Improved understanding of the place identities of the West Midlands, within the region itself, nationally, and internationally.
- Increased land values.
- Increased investment profile for the region, particularly around green business and low carbon technology.
- Accelerated public service reform and policy interventions that underpin and accelerate the adoption of the WMNP approach.

2.16 It will be important to identify the key stakeholders that are critical for successful delivery of the West Midlands National Park and to bring them together in a formal partnership. As part of this there will be an influencing role for WMCA and the seven metropolitan authorities – the latter both as a shaper of place and a planning authority. There will also be roles for statutory and other organisations which shape the natural environment and its links to heritage: e.g. The Environment Agency, The Wildlife Trust, and The National Trust.

## 2.17 Recommendations for the Board:

- To advise on routes for engagement within the local authorities
- Providing links to key programmes of activity/ influential stakeholders that should be engaged

## 2.18 **Virtual Forest**

The West Midlands Virtual Forest was launched in January this year. The Virtual Forest website acts as a tool for recording and promoting tree planting in alignment with the WM2041 ambitions to plant a tree per head of population over the next 15 years. Tree planting is beneficial to the region in numerous ways; absorbing atmospheric carbon, providing valuable habitats, creating shade and reducing flood risk. Trees can also help improve physical and mental health.

2.19 The project works on a philosophy of 'crowd planting' and we will work in collaboration with a number of partner organisations such as local tree planting groups, local authorities, national charities (such as The Woodland Trust and Trees for Cities) and other groups with large scale tree planting initiatives. The site will also seek to link up trees, land and people able to assist with planting, as well as providing support on how to plant trees and how to get further involved with the initiative.

2.20 The first iteration of the West Midlands Virtual Forest website was functional but required some development to attain the level of functionality that we require to meet our ambitions. Over the summer we have worked with partner organisations to develop the site. The site was recently launched to stakeholders, which has given them further opportunity to provide final feedback ahead of a public launch which is due to take place this autumn. Once the site is formally launched (which will take place after some final user and accessibility testing) we will ask our partner organisations to record any tree planting retrospectively (from January 2020 onwards).

2.21 The tree planting season runs from late November until late March. The vast majority of tree planting activity will take place during this window. The period 28th November – 6th December is 'tree week' and there will be a busy schedule of planting activity over this period; this will be used as a springboard to publicise the new site.

2.22 Our ambition to see large scale public tree planting sessions is unfortunately on hold this year because of Covid-19 restrictions, and the uncertainty that this brings is providing challenges for our partner organisations. We are keen to continue to work with partner organisations to publicise activity, and the importance of tree planting, to enable people from across the West Midlands to get involved in some way this year. We are also seeking collaboration with stakeholders who are already planning on planting trees on private land to engage with the platform to help us reach our target.

## 2.23 Recommendations for the Board:

- Identifying routes to help promote the site and engage with the project.
- Engage colleagues within their organisation to retrospectively add any tree planting from early this year
- Sharing tree planting plans for the 2020/21 season.
- Identifying a tree planting target for each local authority up until the end of 2021.

### **3. Financial Implications**

3.1 There are no direct financial implications from this report and the projects listed within it.

### **4. Legal Implications**

4.1 There are no direct legal implications as a result of these programmes. We are working to comply with legal requirements around the Virtual Forest platform in relation to accessibility. For the other programmes, legal implications will emerge on a project-by-project basis.

### **5. Equalities Implications**

5.1 The key equalities consideration is around the web platform for the Virtual Forest and ensuring that there is compliance with the new accessibility standards (valid from 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2020). There is considerable work taking place with the WMCA web team to ensure that this is the case.

### **6. Inclusive Growth Implications**

6.1 WM2041 recognises the importance of social and economic co-benefits of addressing climate change, as well as how to achieve carbon reduction in a way that does not leave anyone behind. Widening access to natural capital for physical and mental health benefits, as well as improving the resilience of our communities with regard to climate change, will be a key part of this programme of activity.

### **7. Geographical Area of Report's Implications**

7.1 The core work of the natural capital work will cover constituent local authorities of the West Midlands Combined Authority. However, parts of the programme will also encompass other parts of the WMCA/ West Midlands geography.

### **8. Other Implications**

8.1 None.

### **9. Schedule of Background Papers**

9.1 None.