

Green transformation of the West Midlands

The Local Nature Partnerships' proposal towards a Local Nature Recovery Strategy

The Local Nature Partnerships¹ of the West Midlands Combined Authority area are committed to working with the WMCA to deliver a green transformation which helps address the global climate and ecological emergencies. Creating a healthy and resilient environment through targeted and evidence-based investment in nature-based solutions and green infrastructure will help reverse biodiversity decline whilst tackling poor air quality, pollution, flooding and overheating in urban areas; providing access to high quality green space for all will deliver improvements to the health and wellbeing of our communities; investing in training and job creation for the next generation of green sector professionals will support a post-COVID-19 recovery.

The West Midlands Industrial Strategy (2019) commits '*to developing a long-term plan for Natural Capital and to the principle of an annual net gain for natural capital, developing the tools that enable us to work towards reversing the current trend in biodiversity loss*'. The WMCA Climate Action Plan WM2041 (2020) proposes to deliver a Natural Capital Investment Strategy and Delivery Programme within the first five-year plan. The LNPs' proposal sets out how we believe these ambitions can be achieved through a partnership which brings together the regional organisations best placed to lead and inform a green transformation, developing and delivering a WMCA Local Nature Recovery Strategy².

Natural capital refers to the elements of the natural environment which provide valuable goods and services to people. For example, a woodland can be regarded as a natural capital asset, from which flows valuable benefits, or ecosystem services, such as flood risk reduction and carbon capture. Natural capital is composed of many assets, including soils, wetlands and urban greenspaces, whilst the ecosystem services they provide include improved human health, pollination by insects of our food crops and biodiversity. Nature-based solutions refers to the sustainable planning, management and use of natural capital to maximise the ecosystem services that tackle the challenges that society faces.

The Local Nature Partnerships' proposal

Strategic planning and investment must be based on sound evidence in order to achieve the greatest social, economic and environmental benefits from natural capital assets. Our proposal is to provide a digital (map-based) resource that decision makers can utilise. A maintained 'live' online portal will provide planners, developers, agencies, health providers, farmers and others with the information they need to help them understand how transport, housing, employment, health and agricultural decisions can be maximised to deliver a range of socio-environmental benefits. These informed decisions will contribute to achieving the long-term Local Nature Recovery Vision and Strategy. The portal will update mapped data to reflect changes to the environment which the LNPs will report directly to the WMCA Environment Board, enabling the WMCA to monitor and report publicly on both the positive and negative impacts of actions.

Examples of how the portal will help plan natural capital investment and deliver ecosystem benefits include:

- Target tree planting where it will best mitigate the impacts of climate change on flooding, air quality and biodiversity.
- Identify deficits and investment opportunities for accessible natural green space to deliver health and wellbeing benefits for those communities in most need.
- Provide guidance on urban green infrastructure needs, supporting investment in the regeneration of town centres as desirable residential, leisure and hospitality locations.

Where are we now?

There have been recent investments in developing an ecological baseline for the WMCA area which has provided an important step towards understanding the current state of the area's natural assets. Further development of these data is underway:

In 2019 EcoRecord and the Habitat Biodiversity Audit (HBA)³, with support from the WMCA, developed an approach to the use of satellite imagery which enabled the creation of a comprehensive habitat map for the WMCA area. The Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country and EcoRecord have been commissioned by the Black Country local planning authorities and Birmingham City Council to produce a Local Nature Recovery map and, in the Black Country, an investment Opportunities Map and Statement of Biodiversity Priorities. This work is due to be completed in spring 2021 and will form the basis for the development of the WMCA-wide Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Next steps

We propose a series of actions which the LNPs and Wildlife Trust teams would deliver in phases to the WMCA as financed projects. WMCA would benefit from the development work already undertaken by LNP partners outlined above.

1. Collation of existing evidence and identification of additional data requirements.
2. Generation of additional WMCA-wide data including natural capital assets (habitats).
3. Ecosystems Services Assessment – utilising the data to understand the services provided by the current assets and identifying locations where there are 'deficits'.
4. Natural Capital Valuation – calculating the financial value of the ecosystem services that the assets currently provide.
5. WMCA Green Transformation Vision – a collaborative exercise undertaken with stakeholders and potential investors.
6. Identification of opportunities (locations and types) where natural capital investment will achieve the greatest socio-environmental impact.
7. Identification of natural capital investment routes and mechanisms including Biodiversity Net Gain, agricultural environment schemes and flood-risk management funds.
8. Local Nature Recovery Network Strategy – production of a written strategy, working collaboratively with partners, which details how the vision will be achieved including outcomes, opportunities and investment mechanisms.
9. Development of a web-based tool (map portal) to host and make available the data, vision and strategy.

Background context

¹ Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs):

Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) are non-legal partnerships established as a key Natural Environment White Paper commitment (2010). Defra set out their vision of the role of LNPs in 2012:

The ambition for LNPs is that they will help their local area to manage the natural environment as a system and to embed its value in local decisions for the benefit of nature, people and the economy. To do this effectively they will need to be self-sustaining strategic partnerships of a broad range of local organisations, businesses and people with the credibility to work with, and influence, other local strategic decision makers.

In 2012 an amendment to the Town and Country Planning Regulations (Local Planning) gave LNPs a role in cross-boundary strategic planning - technically that '*bodies bound by the Duty to Co-operate should*

cooperate with and have regard to the views of Local Nature Partnerships in the planning of sustainable development'

LNPs are recognised in the National Planning Policy Framework in the section Maintaining Effective Cooperation: *'Local planning authorities and county councils (in two-tier areas) are under a duty to cooperate with each other, and with other prescribed bodies, on strategic matters that cross administrative boundaries. Strategic policy-making authorities should collaborate to identify the relevant strategic matters which they need to address in their plans. They should also engage with their local communities and relevant bodies including Local Enterprise Partnerships, Local Nature Partnerships...elected Mayors and combined authorities (in cases where Mayors or combined authorities do not have plan-making powers).'*

Birmingham and the Black Country LNP

The Birmingham and the Black Country (B&BC) LNP was recognised by the government in 2012, with a vision *'To restore a sustainable natural environment that plays an essential role in creating a vibrant, healthy and prosperous Birmingham and Black Country'*, achieving this by *'...providing a single voice for the natural environment at a strategic level, representing the sub-region's perspective to national and local decision makers'*.

Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull LNP

The Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull (WCS) LNP was recognised by the government in 2012, with a vision that *'Our high quality environment is valued across all sectors of Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull as being an essential part of a thriving economy, a vibrant society and a healthy future. The Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull LNP will promote and co-ordinate action to radically improve the natural environment and ensure that it is valued across society.'*

The Wildlife Trust for Birmingham & the Black Country (WTBBC) and Warwickshire Wildlife Trust (WWT) provide secretariat function to the respective LNPs.

² Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS):

The overarching ambition of the Defra 25 Year Environmental Plan is to 'leave our environment in a better state than we found it and to pass on to the next generation a natural environment protected and enhanced for the future' (Defra, 2018). The plan highlights a number of key areas for action, one being to establish a Nature Recovery Network which will ensure resilient and coherent habitat networks for species, landscapes and ecosystems that provides wider benefits and value for people and helps to tackle climate change.

The Environment Bill will mean local areas will need a Local Nature Recovery Strategy to bring a broad range of groups together to deliver priorities for nature recovery at a local and national level, driving the delivery of a National Nature Recovery Network.

³EcoRecord and Habitat Biodiversity Audit (HBA):

EcoRecord is the Local Environmental Records Centre (LERC) for Birmingham and the Black Country and is hosted by the Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country. The Habitat Biodiversity Audit, which covers Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull, is an innovative project providing an unrivalled picture of detailed habitat mapping which has underpinned informed decision making on spatial planning for over two decades. The HBA Team and Partnership are managed by Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, and the team is hosted by Warwickshire County Council and links with Warwickshire Biological Records Centre.

EcoRecord and the Warwickshire Habitat Biodiversity Audit play a critical role in supporting the delivery of government policy in relation to Natural Capital, Local Nature Recovery Strategies and Biodiversity Net Gain by maintaining and developing local data infrastructure.