



West Midlands  
Combined Authority

## Environment & Energy Board

<b>Date</b>	9 September 2021
<b>Report title</b>	Natural Environment Plan
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### Recommendation(s) for action or decision:

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

- (1) Note the final version of the Natural Environment Plan.
- (2) Support delivery of the actions contained within the plan.

#### 1. Purpose

- 1.1 This paper accompanies the final version of the first regional Natural Environment Plan (previously referred to as the Natural Capital Plan). This plan reflects on the independent advice from the WSP WM2041 Five Year Plan and extensive stakeholder engagement with natural capital leads from regional organisations, including local authorities.

## 2. Background

- 2.1 In June 2019, WMCA declared a climate emergency and in July 2019 a target date of 2041 was established for the region to achieve net zero carbon emissions. In January 2020, the WMCA strategy (*#WM2041: Actions to meet the climate crisis with inclusivity, prosperity and fairness*) was launched. This plan cut across the different actions that would be required to achieve the 2041 goal in a way that supported inclusive growth across the region. Natural environment played a key role in the strategy in terms of supporting resilience and adaptation; providing a route to mitigate climate change; and recognising the importance of green space for people across the region.
- 2.2 The recognition of the multifunctional benefits of the natural environment continued in the follow-up paper that went to the CA Board in June 2020 (*WM2041: A Programme for Implementing an Environmental Recovery*). This paper set out the urgent activity and need for the WMCA and stakeholders to produce five-year delivery plans (four in total) in support of delivering the zero carbon target for the West Midlands by 2041. The first of these WM2041 Five Year Plans (FYPs) was presented to the CA Board in March 2021 and has implications for regional natural environment programmes.
- 2.3 In terms of the natural environment specifically, the *WM2041: A Programme for Implementing an Environmental Recovery* paper highlighted the need to address inequalities of access to green space that had been magnified during the first Covid-19 lockdown. In response to this, the WMCA commissioned the New Economics Foundation (NEF) to produce a report on access to green space across the West Midlands. The Community Green Grants scheme, due to be launched in autumn 2021, and funded by the WMCA, will be a route to support action to redress the inequalities identified.
- 2.4 The WMCA has also launched the Virtual Forest website, as part of the commitment to plant more trees across the region. This is providing a focal point for people to register trees that have been planted and to share information about events and opportunities. This will be increasingly important as the WMCA accelerates delivery based on evidence in the first WM2041 Five Year Plan. This indicates that there needs to be a significant uplift in the tree planting effort across the region to support delivery of the net zero target; when Covid-19 restrictions lift the site will enable us to work with regional stakeholders to tackle this.
- 2.5 The Natural Environment Plan has previously been discussed and approved by the Environment and Energy Board at the March 2021 meeting. The plan articulates a vision for the region, bringing together the different initiatives described above whilst recognising the important work that other regional actors are doing:

*'Our vision is of a West Midlands where everybody can enjoy the benefits of the natural environment and that, through careful planning and collaboration, we protect, restore and enhance the region's natural capital to address both the climate and ecological emergencies'.*

2.6 The plan covers a broad range of natural environment projects focusing on tree and hedgerow planting, improving access to green space for all communities across the West Midlands and developing our wildlife corridors. The aim is to improve these environments in their own right, promoting biodiversity net gain, as well as for all the region's communities to enjoy. It also covers a number of enabling functions that will need to be put into place in order to ensure these actions are achieved (for example, securing financing and behaviour change initiatives). The actions that we propose taking fall under the following themes:

- **Widening access to green and blue spaces** for all communities across the West Midlands, initially focusing on places where there is a deficit of access.
- **Increasing tree and hedgerow planting**, but with an emphasis on 'right tree, right place', to support climate mitigation and adaptation.
- **Promoting wildlife corridors** and working with natural corridors (both green and blue) as well as those linked to infrastructure projects, e.g. along cycle ways.
- Recognising the importance of the **enablers of change** and supporting activity around financing and behaviour change that will enable the roll out, impact and scalability of the initiatives in this plan.

2.7 The priority projects for the WMCA, as outlined in the Natural Environment Plan, will be:

- Launch a **Community Green Grants** programme that provides communities with funding to deliver projects that improve access to, and quality of, green and blue spaces for those that need it most.
- Build on the launch of the **West Midlands Virtual Forest** to co-ordinate an ambitious regional tree planting programme, starting with the planting of the Commonwealth Games 2022 Legacy Forest by Severn Trent Water.
- Set up a **Wildlife Corridors Commission** to develop a 'doorstep to landscape' vision for the region, maximising the connectivity, for both people and wildlife, through green and blue corridors.
- Develop **regional natural capital data capture and mapping** to better understand the state of the region's nature and prepare the foundations for a Local Nature Recovery Strategy.
- Produce the first **West Midlands Natural Capital Investment Plan** that prioritises investment opportunities, funding requirements and routes to delivery, for the protection, restoration and enhancement of the region's natural capital.

2.8 Achieving this will require us to work closely with all regional stakeholders; these are clearly set out in Section 1.4 of the Natural Environment Plan. We are also proposing to establish a Natural Capital Board, which will drive forward the priority activity. The governance is set out in Section 4.2 of the Plan. We propose that this Board will prepare a 'State of the Region's Nature' report annually, based on the data and mapping. This will be the first of a series of five year plans on the natural environment; this timeframe has been adopted to mirror that of the five year carbon plan.

### **3. Financial Implications**

- 3.1 There are no immediate financial implications as a result of the proposals within this paper.
- 3.2 However, the Natural Environment Plan will consist of several investment opportunities requiring investment through a variety of routes, including local authorities, central government, private finance models, crowdfunding models as well as WMCA. Each opportunity will require comprehensive business cases to be developed which will then be brought forward for approval in the first instance to the Natural Capital Board.
- 3.3 It is worth noting that WMCA Board has already approved a Community Green Grants programme in March 2021 (£725k), that provides communities with funding to deliver projects that create, enhance and improve access to green and blue spaces for those that need it most. This is due to launch this autumn.

### **4. Legal Implications**

- 4.1 There are no legal implications as a result of this paper or the Natural Environment Plan. Any legal implications will be considered as part of the approach to delivery of the Natural Environment Plan.

### **5. Equalities Implications**

- 5.1 The work that has been undertaken on the natural environment is central to the addressing the challenges related to climate change; the natural environment has a key role to play in both mitigation and adaptation. However, we have been clear from the outset that WM2041 must also have significant social and economic benefits for the region. The natural environment has emerged as an area where there are currently clear inequalities of access to high quality green space, either because of distance or pressure on what is currently available. The work that we will be taking forward will look to address this, driven by data that is available to us.

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

- 6.1 WM2041 was established as a programme that had inclusive growth embedded within it. The commitment to transition to net zero in the WM2041 plans, as well as the alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, underpin our whole approach to addressing climate change. This also runs through the FYP, where we have highlighted co-benefits around addressing climate change. These range from reduction of fuel poverty through an extensive retrofit programme, through to natural capital solutions and widening access to green space for people across the region.

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

- 7.1 The Natural Environment Plan covers all local authorities of the West Midlands and the delivery will also involve non-constituent members, which we have reflected in the membership of the Natural Capital Officer Group.

## **8. Other Implications**

8.1 None.

## **9. Appendix**

9.1 Final Natural Environment Plan