



West Midlands
Combined Authority

Environment & Energy Board

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Report title	Natural Environment Update
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Recommendation(s) for action or decision:

The Environment & Energy Board is recommended to:

- (1) To note the progress of the different elements of the natural environment programme.
- (2) To support the West Midlands Forest Partnership concept.
- (3) To support the progress of conversations with Natural England on the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

1. Purpose

- 1.1 This paper is to update on progress on delivery of the Natural Environment Plan, particularly on Local Nature Recovery Strategies, a bid to the Woodland Trust to establish a West Midlands Forest Partnership and progress on the Community Green Grants.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Natural Environment Plan has previously been discussed and approved by the Environment and Energy Board and was launched in September 2021. 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’.

- 2.2 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.

- 2.3 Delivery of these actions will require collaboration with a range of different stakeholders from government, the third sector and business. We will also work with communities across the West Midlands in terms of implementing initiatives.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies

2.4 The UK government's Environment Act (2021) formalises plans to establish Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs) across England. The aim of LNRSs is they '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'. Each LNRS area will have a responsible authority, appointed by the Secretary of State, to lead its preparation with an expectation that there will be local collaboration with a partnership of organisations and individuals working closely with each responsible authority.

2.5 Each Strategy will, for the area that it covers:

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

2.6 The production of each LNRS 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 England-wide 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.

2.7 The Government anticipates that there will be roughly 50 LNRSs that together will cover the whole of England with no gaps and no overlaps. The aim is that every LNRS covers an area that is both large enough to plan for nature recovery across landscapes and meaningful to local people. It is anticipated that in many cases there will be one LNRS per county (or equivalent). The WMCA has been approached to be the responsible authority for the West Midlands and to work in collaboration with stakeholders to prepare the LNRS. We are currently awaiting a conversation with Natural England to understand what this would mean in practice.

2.8 There have been five pilot areas for the LNRSs (Cornwall, Cumbria, Buckinghamshire, Greater Manchester and Northumberland). These have worked with a 6 step process, outlined on the government's website:

- Step 0: Government provides a map of each Strategy area, including habitats and national conservation sites
- Step 1: Locally held data is added to the map, including locally identified wildlife sites
- Step 2: Description of the Strategy area, including its key habitats and potential opportunities to create or improve them
- Step 3: Identification of outcomes, achieved through creation or improvement of habitat, and grouping of these into "priority" and "other"
- Step 4: Potential measures for creating or improving habitat to achieve the priority and other outcomes

- Step 5: Mapping of suitable locations for the delivery of the potential measures onto map of existing habitat (established in Steps 0 and 1)

Steps 2, 3 & 4 combine to create the “statement of biodiversity priorities” and Steps 0, 1 & 5 combine to create the “local habitat map”.

2.9 We will work with all local authority partners as conversations with Natural England begin; this will be through the Net Zero Directors Group and well as the Net Zero Officers and Natural Capital Officers Groups. We will bring an update to a future Environment and Energy Board.

West Midlands Forest Partnership

2.10 The WMCA Environment Team was approached by the Woodland Trust around the potential to establish a regional ‘forest partnership’ to bring stakeholders together more systematically to support the regional tree planting ambitions. This is based on similar work that they have supported through the Essex Forest Partnership. A meeting was held with local authorities who were supportive of the development of this approach.

2.11 Subsequently, the Woodland Trust have suggested that their Emergency Tree Fund could be a route to kickstart a West Midlands Forest Partnership (WMFP) and so a bid has been prepared to support the partnership. There are 4 elements to the bid:

- (a) **Appointing a West Midlands Forest Partnership Coordinator.** The ambitious tree planting target in the Five Year Plan, and developing the potential of the Virtual Forest, will be supported by a post to drive the work forwards. This role will also coordinate the WMFP and bring stakeholders together around tree planting programmes and seeking additional funding to support it.
- (b) **Mapping current trees across Coventry, Solihull and Birmingham.** Building on the Black Country Consortium’s I-Tree Eco study we wish to extend that to the remaining constituent authority areas, this will make it the largest study in the UK. Completing this study will provide baseline data on tree species diversity, size and condition as well as the value of ecosystem services delivered. The I-Tree Eco data will provide information that will help with long term planning for and identify areas of priority for investment in expanding and building resilience into the Urban Forest.
- (c) **Citizen engagement.** We will use existing networks and relationships, especially those that have specialist knowledge around tree planting programmes, to support the West Midlands Forest Partnership from a community perspective. We will also use this project to trial an online tool/citizen engagement platform as a means of engaging with the wider community with consultations on tree planting. Residents can offer suggestions and ideas and the platform will allow us to analyse real-time community insights. The platform could also be used to survey residents, in areas of tree planting, to understand if there have been any perceived benefits to their health and wellbeing.

- (d) Holding a **landowner's summit** to identify private land for tree planting. This is one of the actions identified in the Natural Environment Plan and the bid we are putting into the Emergency Tree Fund includes some budget for hosting an event, which will also draw on support from the Woodland Trust.

2.12 The bid was submitted for the deadline of 26th November and we will keep the Environment and Energy Board informed of the outcome.

Community Green Grants

2.13 With the approval of the Five Year Plan in March, the CA Board allocated a budget of £725k to support a programme of Community Green Grants to improve access to green space. The Community Green Grants Officer started with the WMCA in September and has been developing the grants programme, as well as meeting with community groups to raise awareness of the grants programme.

2.14 The WMCA has launched a procurement to appoint an organisation with expertise in grant administration. This organisation will manage the financial elements of the grant, whilst the CA leads on the work to ensure the grants are meeting the outcomes on addressing 'green deprivation'. The overarching aims are to:

- Increase or improve green spaces close to where people live (e.g. within ten-minute walk).
- Connect people to nature, especially communities experiencing green deprivation
- Enhance the local environment (e.g. tree planting, increasing biodiversity)
- Tackle barriers to accessing green spaces, e.g. concerns around safety or the lack of awareness of local green space

2.15 We envisage that there will be two different types of grant, with a focus on capital expenditure, but with some allowance for revenue to support grant preparation and staff time. Currently the timeframe for the CGG is 2 years and will end in March 2024. Further funding is being sought to extend the Community Green Grants scheme. The two types of grant are:

- Small grants (£3k up to £25k). There will be 20+ (depending on how much organisations apply for) of these grants and we want to encourage applications from "grass roots" organisations with already established links into communities.
- Larger grants (£25k - £100k). We envisage running two large grants (possibly more if they are coming in at the lower end of this range)

2.16 We are looking for creative ideas that meet the grant criteria, examples of potential projects are:

- Activities run at community gardens/ allotments for example tree planting, gardening, growing fruit and vegetables
- Turning unused viable land into pocket parks
- Nature playgroups that give children and families with no regular access to green space an opportunity to experience hands on activities.

- Development of green corridors linking parks/ community gardens/ other green spaces
- Development of new community green spaces that increase local access
- Projects that significantly improve the biodiversity of the area and promote behavioural change on accessing green spaces. The proposal is to run a programme with two types of grant.

2.17 The formal launch is being planned for the end of January 2022 and we will bring an update to the next Environment and Energy Board.

3. Financial Implications

3.1 There are no immediate financial implications as a result of the proposals within this paper.

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 on a project-by-project basis.

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 This report links to a number of the WMCA's eight inclusive growth priorities, which are identified as 'a catalyst for improved and sustained outcomes for people place, co-designed with partners and beneficiaries'. Improving the natural environment will support outcomes around:

- reduction of health inequalities;
- addressing climate resilience through the promotion of nature-based solution to dealing with climate change;
- supporting the principle of connected communities through enabling more spaces and opportunities to bring people together in green space; and,
- equality (reducing the numbers of people living in deprivation, which includes lifting people out of 'green deprivation').

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. Schedule of Background Papers

- 9.1 None