****

**The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Nature**

**Annual General Meeting and Event on Local Authority Capacity to Deliver the 25 Year Environment Plan**

**Minutes of the Meeting**

**21 April 2021, 10:00-11:40, Online via Zoom**

**Agenda**

1. Chair welcome
2. APPG for Nature Annual General Meeting (AGM)
3. Local Authority capacity to deliver the 25-Year Environment Plan and Environment Bill measures
	1. Melanie Hughes, Natural England
	2. Elizabeth Milne, Association of Local Government Ecologists
	3. David Lowe, Warwickshire County Council
4. Q&A
5. Thank you and close

**Attendees**

Parliamentarians: Barry Gardiner MP, Kerry McCarthy MP, Geraint Davies MP, The Duke of Wellington, Phillip Dunne MP, Dawn Butler MP, Baroness Parminter, Rosie Duffield MP, Theo Clarke MP, Harriette Drew (Office of Barry Sheerman MP)

Secretariat: Amber Connett (CIEEM), Hayden Banks (House of Commons)

External organisations:

* Kate Long (North Somerset Council)
* Sarah Jackson (Bristol City Council)
* Dr Jill Sutcliffe
* Steve Oram (PTES)
* Suzanna Jackman (Transport for London)
* Elliot Chapman-Jones (The Wildlife Trusts)
* Caroline Jessel (Kent Nature Partnership)
* Joe Nunez-Mino (Bat Conservation Trust)
* Chris Walsh (Middlemarch Environmental)
* Max Wade (AECOM and CIEEM President)
* Kate Townend (Atkins)
* Francis Castro (Vision RCL)
* Alister Scott (Northumbria University)
* Steve Lucas (Bat Conservation Trust)

**Minutes**

***Welcome***

Barry welcomed all to the meeting and declared the AGM quorate due to the attendance of Parliamentarians listed above.

***AGM***

The purpose of this AGM was to elect Officers of the APPG for Nature. A financial statement was not required as the group’s funds to not exceed the limit.

Barry Gardiner was elected re-Chair of the APPG for Nature.

Geraint Davies and Baroness Parminter were elected as Vice Chairs.

Kerry McCarthy, Alexander Stafford and Barbara Young will also return as Officers of the Group.

Amber outlined the following forward plan of activities for the coming year, noting that the group is planning in-person events in accordance with the easing of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions:

* Visit to Knepp rewilding project on land management
* A site visit on floodplains and their contributions to Nature-based Solutions
* Taxonomy and GCSE on Natural History, possibly at Kew Gardens
* Winter online events including one on water-quality and the impact on aquatic species, and on non-native invasive species.

These will be advertised on the All-Party Notices and APPG for Nature email list.

Concerns were raised on the impact of raw sewage on aquatic species and there was support for the APPG for Nature engaging with this topic and highlighting the importance of addressing this issue through the Environment Bill.

It was also agreed that the Chair of the Office for Environmental Protection will be invited to a meeting once the body is established.

**Main Event: Local Authority Capacity to Deliver the 25 Year Environment Plan and Environment Bill Measures**

Barry introduced the event, noting its purpose is to discuss the ability to deliver the government’s plans for the natural environment introduced through the 25-Year Environment Plan and Environment Bill.

The group has brought together a panel who can inform us of the overall challenge, the perspective from Local Authorities and give specific example of implementing these initiatives. Unfortunately Julia Green from Redrow Homes was unable to join as a speaker on the day to offer a developer perspective.

***Delivering Environmental Ambition Locally – Melanie Hughes, Director of Sustainable Development Programme, Natural England***

Melanie delivered a talk setting out what delivering the ambition of the Environment Bill and 25-Year Environment Plan looks like locally, and the requirements for Local Authorities specifically.

Key messages from this presentation are outlined below:

* Nature must be an integral part of the planning system and we must fully explore how a resilient environment can underpin a resilient economy, as recommended by the Dasgupta review.
* There are a lot of moving parts in implementing this, from the Environment Bill and 25-Year Environment Plan to the Planning White Paper and Project Speed. There are natural tensions between these different initiatives so work is needed to ensure the planning reform embeds nature into the planning system.
* Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) will map out the Nature Recovery Network and set out what services will be provided by the environment and where important habitats are. The Environment Bill sets a responsibility for local ‘bodies’ to develop LNRS’s and it seems likely this will be Local Authorities (LAs).
* LNRS’s will be a useful tool to direct investment. Every public body will need to have regard and report on them every five years.
* The second initiative is green infrastructure – COVID-19 has demonstrated its vital importance and inequality of access to good quality greenspace. Natural England is developing green infrastructure standards as set out in the Environment Bill.
* There is continued fragmentation of habitats and species. The Environment Act will mandate a 10% measurable increase in biodiversity for new developments. This biodiversity net gain (BNG) can be used to deliver LNRS through directed investment. LAs have powers to develop net gain plans and have a requirement to report achievements and 5 year plans for BNG.
* Finally, Local Design Codes are being driven through the current planning reform and set out what is acceptable design quality and beauty for a Local Planning Authority area. Natural England is updating guidance and standards to go along with the codes and promote the consideration of green infrastructure. The codes will be prepared by LAs in partnership with local communities.
* Natural England has proposed strategic, upfront evidence for plan making to make change for nature, water quality and access to greenspace. This cannot be achieved through individual planning decisions.
* Natural England are also calling for clear alignment between statutory environmental plans and development plans in planning reforms, significant upfront investment in green infrastructure and biodiversity net gain, and a robust and proportionate environmental assessment process.
* There are five key areas of change in LA roles: five-year nature plans, strategic solutions, management of development for net gain, raising investment in habitats and reaching new audiences.
* As a statutory consultee, Natural England will be working with LAs across changing areas but LAs must also work across boundaries and work with new stakeholders to develop long-term nature-based solutions.

***Challenges for Local Government in delivering the 25 Year Environment Plan – Elizabeth Milne, Chair of the Association of Local Government Ecologists (ALGE)***

Elizabeth delivered a presentation on the challenges faced by Local Authorities in terms of capacity and the resources required to deliver the initiatives set out by Melanie.

The key messages from this talk are set out below:

* Research by ALGE in 2013 found only one third of LAs had access to in-house expertise in ecology, and where there was in-house expertise, this was stretched across a wide agenda of activities. Most LAs also only have a basic level of expertise meaning they did not have either the capacity or the competence to undertake the effective, and in some cases necessarily lawful, assessment of planning applications where biodiversity is a material consideration.
* There is no evidence to suggest this situation has changed, despite the responsibility to deliver the new initiatives in the Environment Plan and Bill.
* Where there is some knowledge of BNG within authorities, LNRS and other areas of the Environment Bill are less well known. The majority do not have experience of implementing BNG policies.
* Capacity (and capability) building is required throughout the process associated with BNG including the two year transition; delivery and implementation; and monitoring and reporting.
* It is not just ecologists input that is required – input from legal, property, land management, finance and enforcement teams, as well as supporting services, functions and partners, including local records centre and agencies, and other professional disciplines is needed.
* The new initiatives will also require new skills to be developed including the use of the net-gain metric, identifying receptor sites and negotiation with landowners.
* The biggest risks to implementing BNG are likely to be lack of ecological capacity and/or expertise; and lack of enforcement staff.
* Inability to recruit is also concern. Local authorities must have the sufficient resources to offer competitive posts, to compete with salaries offered by consultancies.
* There is a risk of resources being diverted if there aren’t clear drivers for it to go to implementing BNG.
* ALGE, ADEPT and DEFRA have collaborated on a project to provide Defra with a comprehensive understanding of the capacity and capability of local government, with the purpose of generating evidence that can be used to understand the burden of delivery needed to be met. This is currently being reported to Defra and is hoped to be publicly available.
* There is also a project by the Planning Advisory Service, funded by DEFRA, to provide training and support for planning authorities on BNG. This was launched in 2021.
* ALGE is calling for several items to be addressed through the Environment Bill:
	+ Local authorities have sufficient powers, resources and expertise to deliver biodiversity net gain, local nature recovery strategies and good green infrastructure that delivers healthy, vibrant and thriving places.
	+ Local government is engaged in, and influencing, the development of all aspects of the Environment Bill/25 Year Environment Plan deliverables to ensure they’re fit for purpose and can be implemented at the local level.
	+ Ensure biodiversity net gain delivers meaningful gain that recovers nature – can’t become just another tick box exercise. This requires scrutiny and ecological expertise.
	+ Do not water down or weaken the step-changes in environmental protection and nature recovery promised by the Government in the 25 Year Environment Plan; and do not lose or reduce existing protections.
	+ Ensure the new Environmental Land Management scheme is easy for public sector organisations to access and is properly targeted at biodiversity land management.

***Local Authority Capacity and 25 Year Environment Plan at Warwickshire County Council – David Lowe, Delivery Lead: Ecology, Historic Environment & Landscape, Warwickshire County Council (WWC)***

David delivered a presentation outlining the experience of WWC in delivering initiatives such as BNG and creating investment loops to enable ongoing work.

Key messages for this talk are outlined below:

* Reports have shown England to be the most nature depleted country in the world. This necessitates action beyond no net loss to deliver net gain of biodiversity.
* WCC has 14 Ecological Officers, 5 Historical Environment Officers and 3 Landscape Officers. These staff run biological record centres, review planning applications and internal consultancy projects. These activities are contract-led.
* The NERC Act is likely to be strengthened from taking biodiversity into consideration, to enhancing it. Freedom of Information requests in relation to how the LA has considered this duty take a significant resource to respond to.
* There are also local requirements from the Local Council Plans to consider e.g. planting a tree for every Warwickshire resident.
* These new initiatives to enhance biodiversity are very welcomed and necessary.
* WCC take a natural capital approach to deliver the 25 Year Environment Plan and economic growth plans as most of the objectives rely on natural capital.
* To protect natural capital you need good data which allows for informed decision-making. Data management takes a lot of resources – about 2.5 officers to run a record centre.
* WCC has over four million species records and one of the best and most up-to-date habitat maps in the world where every field and hedge is mapped. This is refreshed every 5 years. Habitat corridors have also been mapped for the whole of Great Britain by WCC.
* WCC also has a green infrastructure strategy that sets out plans to identify areas of woodland and grasslands. This allows decisions to be made based on the impact at both a national and local level.
* BNG was introduced in a pseudo-mandatory fashion by WCC in 2013 for planning applications. The market is now established in Warwickshire allowing WCC to act as more of a regulator as well as a broker.
* We must invest in natural capital to deliver the 25-Year Environment Plan and increase the output of ecosystem services. WCC is looking to build markets that will direct investment back into natural capital and pay the council, for example through BNG, carbon capture, catchment services (such as water cycling) and tourism.
* Investing in human resources to set up these initiatives will unlock further investment to deliver and maintain natural capital.

**Question and Answer Session**

Barry asked Melanie for clarification on reporting requirements for LAs as the select committee challenged the five year requirements and agreed on three years to ensure accountability from governments mid-term. Melanie will check this.

Caroline asked David how LAs can get the cycle of investment going. David emphasised the need for upfront investment as WCC implemented this volunatarily and on staff’s own time. WCC also ensured there was 100% cost recovery during the pilot. Natural England also reinforced decisions to enfore BNG. David also emphasised that a range of markets is required to support all aspects.

Barry noted Alister raised the importance of the LNRS but there is a lack of clarity of the weight they carry in planning decisions. David noted there are strong words in the National Planning Policy Framework on enhancing biodiversity but there is a role for advisors to help LAs understand this and the weight behind it so they can be forthcoming in enforcing the policies. Elizabeth added that it is essential to ensure that the 25-Year Environment Plan and its aspirations do not just reside in DEFRA but expand to all government departments, particularly through planning reforms. The LNRS should relate directly to planning.

Sarah asked Elizabeth how the results of the two BNG research projects are being communicated to LA and to whom as it is important to share them widely with teams. The Planning Advisory Service projects will be going directly to planners via their channels. The ALGE and DEFRA project will be communicated through ALGE’s networks and directly to planners. ALGE would also like to engage with MCHLG.

Elizabeth asked the APPG for Nature to spread the message that the environment is owned by everyone and reiterated the importance of up-front money promised to deliver new initiatives is sufficient to kick-start self-sustaining systems and is retained for that purpose. A good example of this is the Lead Local Flood Authorities. Melanie agreed that the LNRS must be picked up by the planning reforms.

Elliot raised the need for strengthening of the duty to ‘have regard’ for the LNRS in the Environment Bill when it returns. Elliot also noted the need to direct investment through streams such as the new Environmental Land Management Schemes as there is a risk of money being wasted if strategies are not utilised.

Steve Lucas noted that BNG does not cover species specifically and asked for clarification from Melanie on what is meant by ‘strategic, upfront evidence’ and how that takes account of needing site level data. Melanie noted that the metric is not a tool for managing protected species and is currently designed to be habitat focused, adding that evidence is needed for what is happening in an area and what the sources are for tackling at plan level. A lot of issues are better addressed at a bigger scale but that doesn’t negate the need for site level decisions in certain cases.

Sarah asked how do Natural England see their role in Local Nature Parnerships and how they can be better resourced to undertake their roles. Melanie noted that LNPs are likely to be key players in developing LNRS’s and they are engaging with a National Nature Recovery Partnership where all players can play a part.

Barry asked how much traction the ALGE-ADEPT project has with political leaders and suggested writing a cross-party letter to Chief Executives, Council Leaders and Group Leaders in LAs, highlighting the lack of capacity to deliver these intiatives and urging them to take action on the points raised today. Baroness Parminter supported this as there is a need to provide leaders an opportunity to respond so Parliamentarians can present the current picture. Elizabeth agreed to contact DEFRA to ask if there is a timeline for the research report being published. It was agreed the letter will not be too detailed in terms of the requirements on LAs but will seek to get leaders to consider the capacity they have and build on it as needed.

David raised that there is a skills-gap for delivering BNG and so there is a need for work by bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management to address this and Barry agreed this is a widespread issue in the environmental sector. David recognised good work in this area but reiterated the need for salaries high enough to attract private sector consultants.

**Close**

Barry thanked speakers for their presentations and attendees for an interesting discussion.