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# inpractice

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# Innovation and the Nature Recovery Network

## Play it again?

The need to recover nature at a landscape scale is not a new concept. For many years ecologists and many others involved in conservation have recognised the need to increase, improve and connect wildlife-rich sites to improve resilience to climate change and to ensure that species can thrive. However, for the past seven decades nature conservation in England has been founded in large part upon the identification and protection of our most important habitats. At the core of this effort has been the notification of Sites of Special Scientific Interest, covering more than a million hectares or over 8% of England. Many are further protected as National Nature Reserves, or through additional legal safeguards operated under international legal obligations. The controls to protect this network of key areas have been vital in safeguarding many of our best wildlife and geological areas. But ultimately, as repeated surveys have revealed, including the *State of Nature*<sup>1</sup>, this is not enough to see nature thrive and to meet the needs of society. We now need to act collaboratively at scale, taking the step from protection into active restoration of the natural world to address the crises facing biodiversity, climate, and public health.

Sir John Lawton's 2010 *Making Space for Nature* report<sup>2</sup> set a blueprint for action through the advice to create more, bigger, better and connected areas of wildlife-rich habitat benefiting nature and people. That vision was furthered by some organisations, who developed a variety of landscape-scale conservation programmes. It has also inspired a state level response. Lawton's recommendations are reflected in the Government's 2018 25 Year Environment Plan (25YEP)<sup>3</sup> which aims to leave nature in better shape for future generations – and it lies at the heart of Government's policy for a new national Nature Recovery Network (NRN).

## So, what's new?

The ambition is to deliver nature's recovery at a scale that we have not seen before. This is nature recovery as a movement, where we work collectively, across sectors, to amalgamate policy, skills, knowledge and resource to deliver one national NRN. The NRN is committed to by Government nationally, spatially planned on a local scale, delivered collaboratively it is underpinned in law and supported by targeted policies, delivery mechanisms and funding streams.

This is the first time:

- we have moved from conservation into active restoration of the natural world
- land management policy is being aligned to support nature recovery
- development will be required to leave habitats for wildlife in a measurably better state through the Environment Bill's introduction of mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain
- nature's recovery will be underpinned by new laws that run through the Environment Bill via a new legally binding target for biodiversity; a requirement for all areas to have Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS); and provision for landowners to set up voluntary conservation covenants
- Natural England have set up a formal national partnership for nature's recovery, involving diverse cross-sectoral organisations, recognising that together we are greater than the sum of our parts

## What is the Nature Recovery Network<sup>4</sup>?

The NRN will be a national network of wildlife-rich places that benefit wildlife and people. Our aim is to expand, improve and connect these places

across our towns, cities and countryside to help us deal with three of the biggest challenges we face: biodiversity loss, climate change and public well-being.

Enhanced sites designated for nature conservation and other existing wildlife-rich places will be at the heart of the NRN. Additional, newly created, and restored wildlife-rich habitat, corridors and stepping stones will help wildlife populations grow and move. Establishing the network will improve the landscape's resilience to climate change. It can also provide natural solutions that reduce carbon emissions, manage flood risk, and sustain vital ecosystem components such as improved soil, clean water and clean air. Its creation will reinforce the natural and cultural diversity of our landscapes, helping to protect our historic environments, and enable us to enjoy and connect with nature where we live, work and play - benefiting public health and well-being, and tackling environmental inequality.

## NRN objectives

Through our collective work to create the NRN, by 2042 we will meet the 25YEP targets to:

- restore 75% of protected sites on land (including fresh water) to favourable condition so nature can thrive
- create or restore 500,000 ha of additional wildlife-rich habitat outside of protected sites
- recover threatened and iconic animal and plant species by providing more diverse and better-connected habitats
- support work to increase woodland cover
- achieve a range of environmental, economic and social benefits, such as carbon capture, flood management, clean water, pollination and recreation

Delivery of the NRN will align with the requirement to expand and improve our existing network of protected areas to achieve our planned Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) target of 30% by 2030<sup>5</sup>.

## How we will set up the NRN

- 1. Spatial planning** – mapping and data, specifically LNRS, introduced via the Environment Bill, which will agree priorities locally across the country and map specific proposals for nature's recovery and wider environmental benefits
- 2. Collaboration** – create cross-sectoral partnerships, including the NRN Delivery Partnership (see box, below)
- 3. Integration** – of our goals for nature with funding streams and land management duties

### 1. Use of mapping and data

#### *Local Nature Recovery Strategies*

LNRS are a new system of spatial strategies for nature, covering the whole of England. Each strategy will, for the area that it covers:

- agree priorities for nature's recovery
- map the most valuable existing areas for nature
- map specific proposals for where action could be taken for nature's recovery as well as where nature-based solutions can help address wider environmental problems (for example climate change mitigation, flood risk management or improving water quality)

LNRS have been designed to drive more coordinated, practical and focused action to help nature and support the NRN. They will be evidence-based, locally led and collaboratively produced.

Following Royal Assent of the Environment Bill, Defra's Secretary of State will look to appoint responsible authorities to lead the preparation and publication of LNRS. It is envisaged there will be around 50, county-sized, LNRS.

### *Pilots*

Natural England has supported the delivery of five LNRS pilots during the last year, in Buckinghamshire, Cornwall, Cumbria, Northumberland and Greater Manchester. Led by responsible authorities, the pilots have tested the process for developing LNRS, generating prototypes and exploring the context of LNRS in the land use planning system alongside other environmental spatial plans. The pilots, which reported in June, have generated important learning which will inform regulations and statutory guidance ahead of national roll out next year, following Royal Assent of the Environment Bill.

### *Evidence and data*

The Environment Bill sets out a requirement for the Secretary of State to provide a national habitat map as part of the framework which will support responsible authorities in preparing LNRS. The map will identify existing national conservation sites and other areas of importance for biodiversity. Natural England will support the development of LNRS by offering relevant evidence and analysis to all responsible authorities. They will build on this with local data and proposals for delivering priority outcomes. The LNRS pilots have provided an opportunity to test how national and local data can be used to inform the preparation of prototype LNRS.

### **2. Create partnerships**

Collaborative action is essential to deliver the NRN. We need to work in partnership with organisations and across sectors, sharing skills, knowledge and resources to help achieve the objectives of the NRN.

This partnership working includes government, landowners and land managers, businesses, developers, local communities and conservation groups. We all have a part to play.

### **3. Integration of funding and land management duties**

A range of delivery mechanisms, funding and duties are being established to underpin the NRN. These mechanisms will include three new schemes<sup>8</sup>: Sustainable Farming Incentive, Local Nature Recovery and Landscape Recovery. They will support sustainable farming practices, and local environmental priorities such as reducing carbon emissions, creating and preserving habitats and making landscape-scale environmental changes. The Countryside Stewardship scheme will continue to be available for existing and new applications until 2024.

Multiple government-led funding opportunities have been made available. The £80m Green Recovery Challenge Fund kick-started a pipeline of nature recovery projects across England, led by environmental charities and their partners. The Nature for Climate Fund provides significant funding to create, restore and manage woodland and peatland habitats.

Opportunities for broadening the funding base for the Network are also being explored, for example by encouraging private and third sector businesses to invest in the natural environment. In particular, the government is incentivising action for businesses in the development sector by mandating Biodiversity Net Gain. (see box, top of page 66)

#### ***NRN Delivery Partnership***

Launched on 5 November 2020<sup>6</sup>, the NRN Delivery Partnership is a broad network of cross-sectoral organisations who work together to carry out action for nature. The partnership is managed by Natural England, supported by the partnership management group<sup>7</sup>.

Organisations within any sector who are willing to commit to nature's recovery can join this partnership. This includes private business, charities and the government sector. The partnership is central to planning and delivery of the NRN.

### Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)

The introduction of a minimum 10% mandatory BNG requirement for development aims to secure positive outcomes for biodiversity, improve the process for developers and create better places for local communities. BNG is one of the policies that will help put us on the path to nature's recovery. There is a hierarchy in terms of the options available to developers to achieve net gain:

1. **Avoid or reduce** biodiversity impacts through site selection and layout.
2. **Onsite** – developers will be able to create or enhance space for nature within the development site, for example through green infrastructure provision.
3. **Offsite** – developers will be able to create or enhance offsite habitats, either on their own land or by purchasing biodiversity units on the private market. There will be a financial incentive for offsite net gain to support the delivery of LNRS through an uplift in the calculation of biodiversity units created at sites identified by the strategy.
4. **Statutory biodiversity credits** – as a last resort, developers will be able to buy statutory biodiversity credits from government where they can demonstrate that they are unable to achieve net gain through the available onsite and offsite options, in order to prevent unreasonable delays in the planning system. Revenues from credit sales will be reinvested to deliver strategic habitat creation and enhancement in line with the priorities of the NRN and LNRS.

### Delivery underway

The NRN and the tree and peat action plans are being delivered in advance of the delayed Convention on Biological Diversity Conference to signal the Government's domestic commitment to biodiversity. Progressing local delivery while policy is still in development is complex, but is already yielding significant gains for nature's recovery across the country. See boxes below and right for examples.

#### G7 Legacy Project, Cornwall

Led by Natural England and Cornwall Wildlife Trust but delivered through a public/private partnership including Imerys, the China Clay company, private landowners, farmers and local communities, this G7 legacy project will restore nature across a complex lowland landscape of towns, villages, farmland, active and post-industrial land. The area is challenged by economic and social deprivation with high levels of environmental, health and education inequality. It builds on the investment already in place at Goss Moor NNR, on land owned by Imerys and the many reserves managed by Cornwall Wildlife Trust where work is in hand to restore nature and improve flood resilience. The project will protect and improve the natural environment; enhance access, provide health, well-being and employment opportunities for local communities; diversify Cornish tourism; and offer new economic opportunities for farmers and local businesses.

#### Wigan Flashes<sup>9</sup>

With 2.8 million people on the doorstep, the proposed declaration of a National Nature Reserve 'Flashes of Wigan and Leigh' is a potential catalyst for developing a resilient landscape of Great Manchester wetlands, which sits between Greater Manchester and Liverpool City regions. This cluster of Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Local Nature Reserves in the Flashes is central to local nature recovery ambitions. It also provides extensive access and recreational infrastructure, offering opportunities for engagement and science in a highly urbanised environment.

The project is the product of collaboration including Wigan Council, the Wildlife Trusts, Natural England, the University of Manchester, the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Greater Manchester Ecology Unit.

### Monitoring and evaluation

Natural England is developing advice on a monitoring and evaluation framework for the NRN. Evaluation will be informed by data gathered across the delivery process at a national and local level. This includes spatial prioritisation (what is mapped, what the ambition is), local delivery (how and what local partnerships are delivering on the ground) and funding (the deployment of resources into the network via key mechanisms). Work to develop the

framework is ongoing, supported by Defra and the NRN Delivery Partnership.

### Next steps

The CIEEM membership has an essential role in driving nature's recovery. We would welcome your input and expertise as partners. We will be holding a seminar to discuss the NRN in greater detail in the autumn, but would encourage you to contact us if you have further queries. Most importantly, please join us.

### Notes

1. [www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/state-of-nature-report/](http://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/state-of-nature-report/)
2. [www.gov.uk/government/news/making-space-for-nature-a-review-of-englands-wildlife-sites-published-today](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/making-space-for-nature-a-review-of-englands-wildlife-sites-published-today)
3. [www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan)
4. [www.gov.uk/government/publications/nature-recovery-network/nature-recovery-network](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nature-recovery-network/nature-recovery-network)
5. [www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-commits-to-protect-30-of-uk-land-in-boost-for-biodiversity](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-commits-to-protect-30-of-uk-land-in-boost-for-biodiversity)
6. [www.gov.uk/government/news/biggest-ever-nationwide-initiative-to-restore-nature-in-england-set-for-launch](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/biggest-ever-nationwide-initiative-to-restore-nature-in-england-set-for-launch)
7. [www.gov.uk/government/publications/nature-recovery-network/nature-recovery-network#partnership-management-group](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nature-recovery-network/nature-recovery-network#partnership-management-group)
8. [www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-land-management-schemes-overview/environmental-land-management-scheme-overview](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-land-management-schemes-overview/environmental-land-management-scheme-overview)
9. [www.wiganflashes.org/web/](http://www.wiganflashes.org/web/)

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