Report to TECC Select Committee

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Title: Overview of outputs and lessons learnt of the Buckinghamshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) Pilot and the proposed approach on producing the real LNRS

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Executive Summary

1.1 Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) are a new, England-wide system of spatial strategies that will establish priorities and map proposals for specific actions to drive nature's recovery and provide wider environmental benefits. The requirement for there to be LNRS, what they are and how they should generally work has been established by the Environment Act 2021. LNRS are an important part of a package of measures that has been introduced by the Environment Bill aimed at reverse nature's decline. LNRS have been designed to work with all of these measures i.e. biodiversity net gain, and to help link them together in a coherent and effective way.

1.2 Buckinghamshire was one of five local authorities to pilot the preparation of a prototype LNRS.

1.3 This report provides an overview of the outputs and lessons learnt of the Buckinghamshire LNRS pilot and the proposed approach on producing a real LNRS as required by the Environment Act.

What is a Local Nature Recovery Strategy?

1.4 Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) are a flagship measure in the Environment Act. Key points to note:

- Production of LNRS is a new statutory requirement set out in the Environment Act (Section 104-8)

- They will agree priorities for nature's recovery and the wider environment

- Opportunities to deliver the agreed priorities are required to be spatially mapped

- LNRS will cover the whole England. The government anticipates each strategy will cover an area roughly county sized and they will cover the entirety of England with no gaps or overlaps

- LNRS will be locally led and production will be undertaken by 'Responsibilities Authorities'

- Responsible Authorities will then have to report on progress on the LNRS every five years

1.5   LNRSs will consist of:

• **A Statement of Biodiversity Priorities**, which reflect stakeholder priorities for environmental outcomes, and the actions that need to be undertaken to achieve these outcomes.

• **A Local Habitat Map** which will identify the existing distribution habitats and the location of areas already important for biodiversity, overlaid by locations considered suitable for delivering the outcomes and actions identified by stakeholders.

1.6   The intention is that LNRS will identify areas of potential importance for biodiversity but that also deliver wider environmental benefits e.g.

- Climate change mitigation through tree planting

- Natural flood management

- Improved water quality

How does the government intend Local Nature Recovery Strategies to be used?

1.7   One of the key uses of the LNRS is to guide the location for delivery of biodiversity net gain investments in relation to the planning system when offsite locations are required. The introduction of a new mandatory requirement for biodiversity net gain in the planning system is another key measure within the Environment Act and will ensure that all new developments increase biodiversity by a minimum of 10%.

1.8   Local Nature Recovery Strategies are intended to be one of the crucial local delivery plans for the UK's Environment Act and support the National Nature Recovery Network. It will specify the local vision for nature's recovery, set out stakeholders' key environmental priorities, and importantly actions that need to be undertaken to reach those local goals.

1.9   The intention is that the documents will also be crucial in channelling investment into locally set priorities for nature recovery and enhancement from a variety of funding sources whether this be via biodiversity net gain, government grants for tree planting, nature-based solutions that deliver climate change objectives, as well as the new Environment Land Management Scheme.

1.10   The Environmental Land Management offer is the new way for government to pay farmers and land managers to deliver public goods such as clean air and water, mitigation of and adaptation to climate change and thriving plants and wildlife. The Local Nature Recovery component of Environmental Land Management seeks to support the delivery of locally targeted environmental goals. The LNRS provides the process and output for building these local priorities.

1.11   The strategies will also be key to help local planning authorities integrate these locally agreed nature priorities into emerging local development plans in terms of understanding locations important for conserving but also enhancing biodiversity

What did the Buckinghamshire LNRS pilot involve?

1.12   In late summer 2020, Buckinghamshire was chosen by the government to be one of 5 pilot authorities to test the end-to-end process of preparing and producing a prototype Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

1.13   Buckinghamshire Council led the development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy Pilot, with the support of a Pilot Area Team, comprised of representatives from the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Natural Environment Partnership, Natural England, Environment Agency, Forestry Commission, Chilterns Conservation Board, and the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust.

1.14   The pilot ran from September 2020 – May 2021 and involved the creation of a prototype Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), which was evidence-based, locally-led and collaboratively produced. The intention is for LNRS to be co-owned and co-created by stakeholders in Buckinghamshire, therefore stakeholder engagement was a fundamental component of the pilot LNRS. A draft prototype LNRS was submitted to the government in May 2021.[1] The pilot itself did not itself involve funding to deliver specific projects on the ground and in the community.

1.15   The primary purpose of the 5 pilots was to help test the draft process for production of a LNRS and feedback lessons learnt to the government, with the intension that these would help shape the forthcoming government guidance and secondary regulations.

Overview of Outputs of Buckinghamshire LNRS

1.16   An extensive amount of work was undertaken in a very short period of time in order to test the required steps to follow in the production of a prototype LNRS. The steps are summarised in the section below.

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[1] Prototype Buckinghamshire LNRS

<u>Step 1&2 – Combining of national and local environmental data sets</u>

1.17   Locally held data sets were added to national habitat and conservation data sets to create a series of baseline maps for Buckinghamshire.[2] [3]

<u>Step 3 - Identification of outcomes to create or improve habitat and prioritisation of outcomes</u>

1.18   An extensive stakeholder engagement process was held over a four-week period of February 2021 which involved:

- Introductory webinar, open to all stakeholders.

- Buckinghamshire-wide online survey, open to all stakeholders.

- Farmer, land manager, and forester online survey.

- Workshops for representatives of Buckinghamshire organisations as well as for farmers, land managers and foresters

1.19   In support of this engagement process a State of Nature Report was produced for Buckinghamshire. This document describes the current state of nature in Buckinghamshire – what there is and where, why it is valuable, and the pressures and threats it faces, to provide context for determining where the focus for nature's recovery should be.[4] The aim of the stakeholder engagement was to gain input into the proposed outcomes or nature as well as the activities to deliver the outcomes.

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[2] Environmental Data used https://bucksmknep.co.uk/download/3198/

[3] Baseline maps data sources https://bucksmknep.co.uk/download/3192/

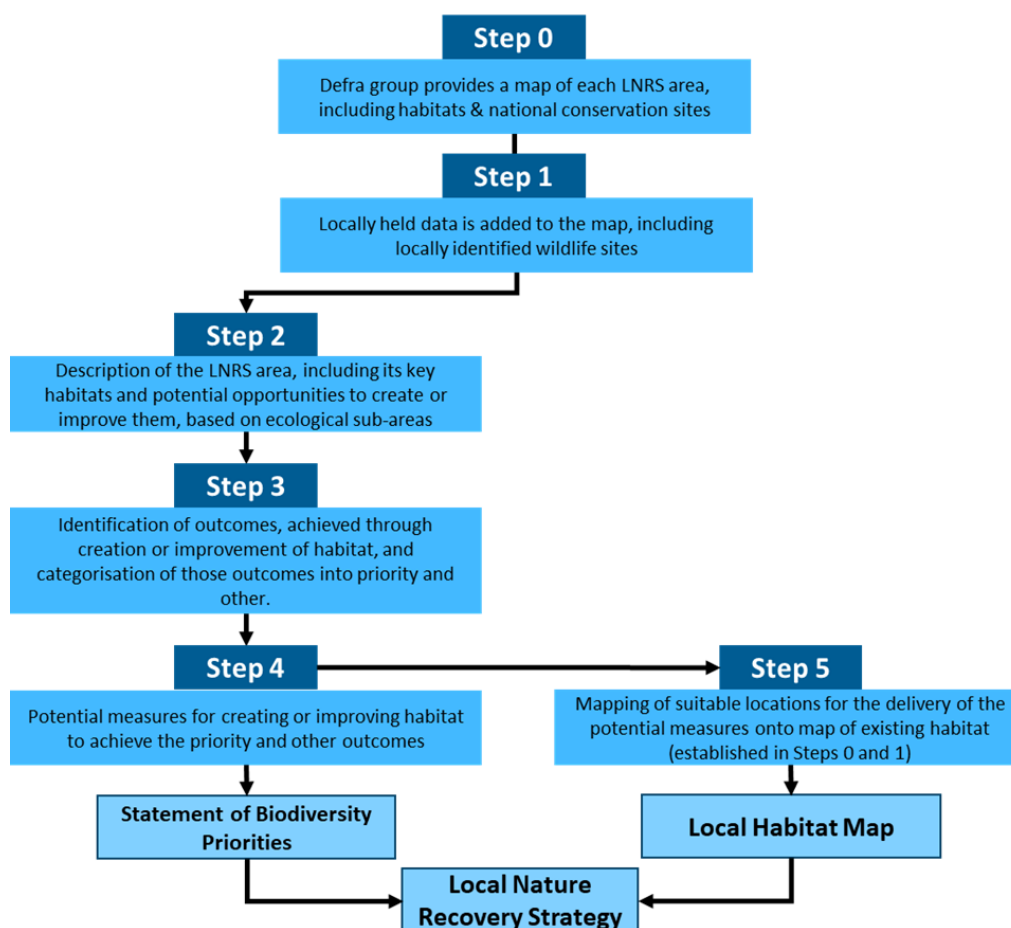[4] State of Nature report for LNRS Pilot https://bucksmknep.co.uk/download/3181/

Fig 1. LNRS Pilot Process showing steps to follow

Step 4 Identification of potential measures to create/improve habitat

1.20 Following the engagement process a stakeholder summary report was completed[5]. The engagement process resulted in over 700 proposed outcomes and activities. These proposed outcomes then went through a review and prioritisation process which resulted in 54 outcomes and associated actions being prioritised.

Step 5 - Mapping of suitable location for delivery of potential outcomes/ measures

1.21 With the help of external consultants, the Buckinghamshire pilot trialled the use of Systematic Conservation Planning approach to translate the prioritised biodiversity outcomes into a spatial Bucks Local Habitat Map taking account of agreed local and national environmental data sets. The systematic conservation planning approach ensures that the nature recovery network that is spatially represented is:

- **Connected**: networks of connected conservation areas ("joined up").

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[5] Stakeholder engagement summary report https://bucksmknep.co.uk/download/3183/

- **Adequate**: enough of each conservation feature is selected to ensure its long-term persistence ("bigger and better").

- **Representative**: every aspect of biodiversity is represented ("more").

- **Efficient**: achieves the conservation goals at minimum cost to other sectors, partly by considering the network as a whole, rather than on a site-by-site basis

1.22 A couple of maps were produced purely for illustrative purposes to demonstrate what a local habitat map for a LNRS could like for Buckinghamshire. The Buckinghamshire pilot went down a zoning approach to show a cohesive nature recovery network. The map shows 4 possible zones:

- Zone 1 - Protected sites and nature reserves

  i. i.e Nationally or locally designated sites

  ii. Land owned/managed by environment bodies i.e. Wildlife Trust

- Zone 2- Maintain and enhance

  i. Priority Habitats

  ii. Ancient and Semi Natural Woodland

  iii. Other important habitats

- Zone 3 – Restore and Recover

  i. Potential areas for priority habitat restoration or creation

- Zone 4 - Wider Landscape

  i. Still important to support nature's recovery but do not contain spatially distinct features (measures in this zone could be planting/restoring hedgerows etc)

1.23 Two scenario maps were produced, one which illustrates a nature recovery network that would represent a doubling of nature (approx. 40% coverage of Zone 1-3) and one which shows a network indicating a 70% coverage. The map showing the nature recovery network that represents a doubling of nature is shown in Figure 2.

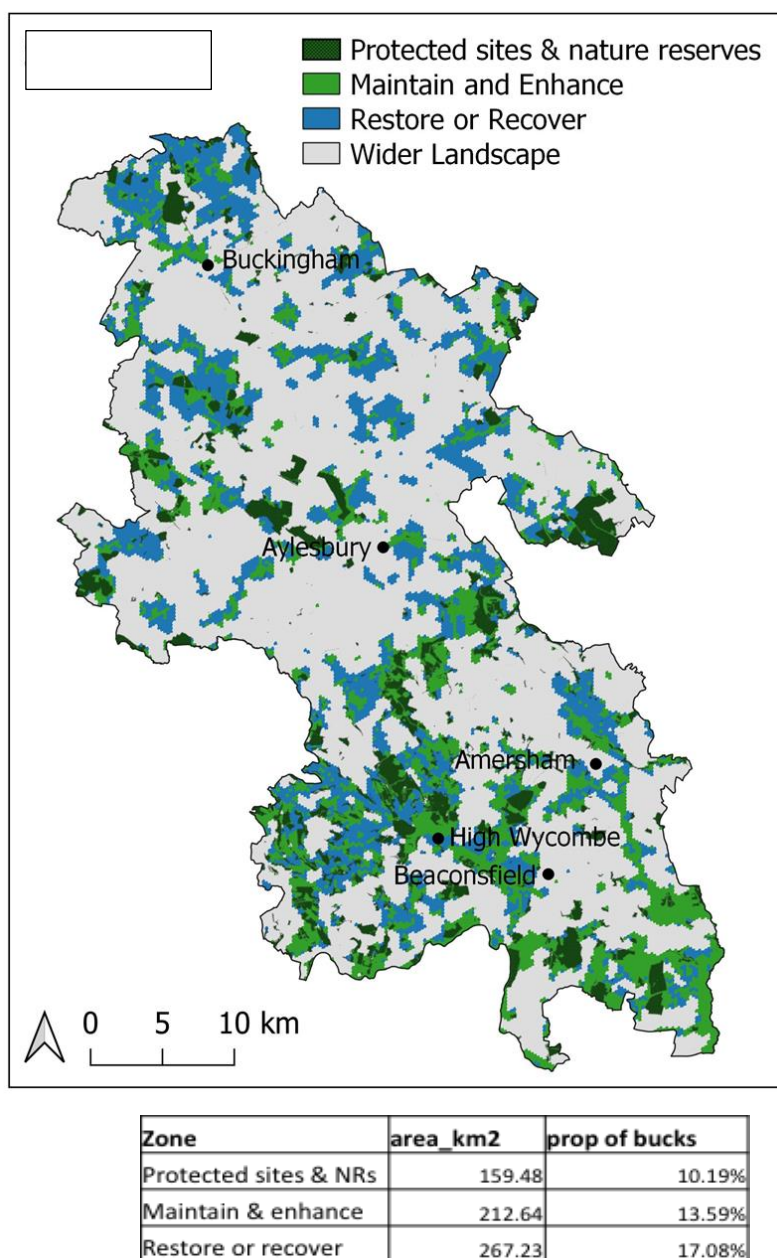| Zone	area_km2	prop of bucks
Protected sites & NRs	159.48	10.19%
Maintain & enhance	212.64	13.59%
Restore or recover	267.23	17.08%

Fig 2 Illustrative nature recovery network representing a doubling of nature

1.24 The maps were produced to demonstrate to the government what one type of nature recovery network might look like. Depending on the final government guidance further thinking would be needed

- on total coverage of the network compared to Buckinghamshire baseline of habitats,

- The number of meaning of the zones taking account of proposed end users i.e. planning, land management, funding etc

- How stakeholder priorities are mapped.

Lessons Learnt

1.25   There were some key lessons coming out of the five pilots who tested the process notably covering 5 themes:

Preparation of Local Nature Recovery Strategies

1.26   The pilots showed how responsible authorities can best set up for the LNRS process:

- strong leadership and transparency from the responsible authority was crucial in getting others involved from the outset

- establishing good governance quickly was important - all of the pilots had a 'pilot area team' which included Defra group arm's-length bodies, environmental non-governmental organisations, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Local Nature Partnership representatives.

- tapping into existing networks was crucial given the time constraints, on the basis that LNRSs require a wide range of inputs and no single existing group can provide this.

Resources and capacity

1.27   It is essential for LNRSs to be adequately resourced with appropriate expertise and capacity to have the required impact:

- LNRSs require contributions from different parts of an organisation at different stages for instance environmental data collation, mapping and planning

- existing capacity within the responsible authority is important to completing the process quickly and effectively - whilst the pilot areas had some existing capacity, all had to bring additional specialist capacity into the project. The skills required included project management, stakeholder engagement as well as technical skills including GIS and mapping.

- The pilots also needed to draw on partners to give them the capacity and expertise they needed - we did not have everything we needed 'in-house' so will need to draw on others when producing the real LNRS. As well as our own ecology input, there was considerable time and technical input from a variety of our partners but notably the Bucks and MK NEP as well as The Bucks, Berks and Oxon Wildlife Trust who led a number of the working groups and drafted key sections with the LNRS and supporting documentation.

Data and evidence

1.28   Good and accessible data is essential to the preparation of LNRSs. There were a number of important lessons here, including:

- national-level habitats information provided to the pilots by Defra and Natural England was too voluminous and hard to use locally. Defra is considering how best to support responsible authorities with the information it provides to them, including via a national habitat map

- the forthcoming guidance needs to be clear on what data responsible authorities should ideally be seeking to use to prevent LNRS partnerships spending too long gathering data

- assessing habitat quality was difficult due to a lack of recent data

- presentation of data needs to be accessible enough to empower non-specialists to make informed suggestions about what their priorities are

- data licensing is a significant issue but it is possible to include datasets whilst protecting their commercial value

Collaboration

1.29 The pilots took different approaches to collaboration. The main lessons include:

- early engagement of a wide range of people and organisations is crucial to secure genuine engagement - effective collaboration takes time, so it is one of the first things to think about in preparing an LNRS

- there cannot be 'one-size-fits-all' engagement - different stakeholders need to be engaged differently. In particular, land managers' role as stakeholders and key delivery partners must be recognised

- professional facilitation expertise was brought in in several pilots to support stakeholder engagement workshops and was valuable

- use of stakeholder inputs needs to be transparent so individuals can see their priorities and views reflected

- establishing a common understanding of the purpose of LNRSs and the process with all stakeholder groups is essential to gathering constructive inputs.

Using the products

1.30 The end users of the strategies were an important consideration throughout the process:

- the prototypes will appeal to a range of potential end users (including local authorities, Defra group, public bodies, landowners, Local Nature Partnerships, environmental organisations and developers) as they cover a broad set of potential environmental benefits as well as more specific habitats and species requirements

- LNRS products should look to achieve consistency across boundaries to make it easier to use more than one at a time

- certain end users require specific guidance on how to use the LNRS products for their means, such as planners or land managers

- a delivery plan is wanted by stakeholders to set out how to implement the potential measures identified in the LNRS

1.31 The above lessons have been taken into account by Defra and we are awaiting the publication of Secondary Regulations and associated guidance by the government to support the roll out of LNRS.

Next Steps and proposed approach

National next steps

1.32 Following the royal assent of the Environment Act 2021, the government is now putting in place a national framework to enable the preparation of LNRSs to commence across the country. This includes confirming strategy boundaries and formally agreeing the roles of the 'responsible authority' to lead in each area.

1.33 Regulations and statutory guidance are a key part of the national framework the government is putting in place to underpin LNRS development. The intention is for them to be published later in 2022. Defra will also publish a national habitat map and make available national data to support LNRS preparation.

1.34 Following the publication of secondary regulations, the level of new burdens funding will be announced for each responsible authority to enable them to prepare a LNRS. It is envisaged that LNRS will be required to be produced by the end of 2023 in order to align with the mandatory biodiversity net gain implementation date.

Local next Steps

1.35 Defra have been undertaking conversations with local authorities to determine appropriate geographic areas on which to prepare LNRSs. The proposed scale of LNRS aims them to join up with the planning system, alongside taking ecological considerations across a sufficiently large scale. Buckinghamshire Council has provisionally been identified as the 'responsible authority' for the production of the LNRS for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. Discussions have been ongoing between ourselves, Defra, MK Council and the Bucks and MK Natural Environment Partnership in terms of agreeing an approach.

1.36 The agreed intended approach is that the Bucks and MK Natural Environment Partnership would be commissioned jointly by Buckinghamshire Council and Milton Keynes Council to lead the preparation of the LNRS which would then require formal approval by each authority. To formalise this a tripartite service level agreement would set out respective roles and how the governance would work between the

three bodies. The exact nature of this somewhat depends on the final guidance and secondary regulations that are due to be published by the government. The Bucks and MK NEP are very well placed to deliver this taking account the nature of the partnership and their recent updating of the Biodiversity Action Plan for Bucks and MK.

1.37   A new project manager that would be recruited into the Bucks and MK NEP would manage the project. We would envisage that a similar officer steering group would be set up as per the Buckinghamshire pilot.

Funding

1.38   Defra distributed approx. £16,000 of seed funding to provisional responsible authorities in March 2022. This funding is intended as seed funding to help build capacity ahead of full funding later in 2022. The government has committed to funding new burdens arising from the Environment Act, including LNRSs. Funding for FY 2022/2023 will be made available later in 2022 to support LNRS preparation, along with formal appointments of responsible authorities.

1.39   It should be noted that the 5 pilots each received approximately £125,000 to help prepare the prototype LNRSs and we are envisaging at least a similar amount being provided to responsible authorities.

1.40   The seed funding identified above together with a small carry forward of funding from the pilot is enabling us to the start the recruitment process for the project manager role to try and ensure this officer is in place for when guidance is issued and to progress with key preparatory work.

Conclusion

1.41   Local Nature Recovery Strategies are one of the key Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) are a flagship measure in the Environment Bill. They are a new system of spatial strategies for nature which will plan, map, and help drive more coordinated, practical, focussed action and investment in nature's recovery to build the national Nature Recovery Network.

1.42   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 and to drive investment and funding where it will have most benefit

1.43   The benefit of Buckinghamshire being a pilot to trial the process has enabled it to get a key insight into the work and preparation required to produce a LNRS. The report sets out the proposed approach for commissioning the Bucks and MK NEP to lead the preparation of the LNRS and the early recruitment of a fixed term project manager.

Background papers:

The outputs from the pilot LNRS process are published below.

Buckinghamshire Pilot Draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy

Appendices:

Appendix 1: Strategies and Policies of Relevance

Appendix 2: The State of Nature in Buckinghamshire

Appendix 3: Stakeholder Engagement Summary Report

Appendix 4a: Stakeholder Data Processing Methodology

Appendix 4b: Stakeholder Data Processing

Appendix 5: Baseline Maps - Source Data and Citations

Appendix 6: Biodiversify Local Habitat Maps Method

Appendix 7: Environmental Data