



Environment and Sustainable Communities Committee

11 December 2024

Title:	Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) Update
Report of:	Judith Barker, Executive Director, Place and Connectivity
Lead Member:	Cllr. Bridget Smith
Public Report:	Yes
Key Decision:	No
Voting Arrangements:	A simple majority of voting Members

Recommendations:

A	To note that a consultation draft of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) will be presented to the Environment & Sustainable Committee for approval for consultation at its June meeting that follows the end of the election period in May 2025.
B	That the Committee proceed to oversee and approve a revised LNRS timetable with an eight week consultation commencing July and target date of adoption by 31 December 2025

Strategic Objective(s):

The proposals within this report fit under the following strategic objective(s):

	Achieving ambitious skills and employment opportunities
	Achieving good growth
	Increased connectivity
x	Enabling resilient communities
	Achieving best value and high performance

1. Purpose

1.1	To note the progress of, and agree a variation to, the timetable for the development of the Draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy that takes into account the requirements of the ongoing technical work and the election period in May 2025.
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2. Proposal

2.1	That a draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy is presented to the Environment & Sustainable Communities Committee meeting that follows the Mayoral and local elections in 2025. The corporate calendar has not yet been confirmed for dates in FY 25/26, but it is planned that the meeting will be in June 2025.
2.2	The Committee will be asked at that meeting to approve the draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy for a statutory 28-day consultation with Supporting Authorities, followed by an 8-week public consultation. The Strategy will then come back to this committee for approval.

3. Background

3.1	The Local Nature Recovery Strategy is a statutory plan in development. An update and progress report was presented to the October Committee. This highlighted that thorough exploration and validations, especially concerning the biodiversity mapping, were important before publishing. Project planning has been ongoing to expedite the best way forward. However these adjustments were expected to result in a delay that prevents consultation to start and finish before the pre-election period.
3.2	Having reviewed the technical work, and the need to incorporate local and ecological expertise, the drafting and validation process is confirmed to extend beyond the date necessary to allow a draft Strategy to be prepared for this Committee and be consulted upon.
3.3	The development of the draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy involves identifying priorities, describing potential measures to achieve those priorities, and mapping those measures. It is important that the mapping of these measures is checked and validated as far as possible prior to public consultation. This also needs to be considered by wider Council and other stakeholders. As they will guide future action and be used in planning decisions, it is also critical that planning authorities are briefed to understand the implications of this work.
3.4	The mapping work is a significant task. Mapping is required down to a level of detail of identifying field or other boundaries on an Ordnance Survey base map across the whole of the Combined Authority geography. This validation, and consideration of how to best present and share this information in an accessible way during a consultation is ongoing. Collaboration continues with local authorities, the Environment Agency, Natural Cambridgeshire, the National Farmers Union, and Natural England.
3.5	Natural England previously reported that six of the 48 local nature recovery strategies nationwide were currently targeted for March 2025, with the majority predicting a November 2025 approval. A single LNRS has been approved (West of England) in November this year. Natural England indicated that a working draft in March 2024 would represent good progress. We continue to work with them and will keep DEFRA updated as to timelines and progress.
3.6	Planning authorities are able to rely on the LNRS once it is in place to influence operation of Biodiversity Net Gain policies. An approved strategy carries its full weight, but as outlined in the Statutory Biodiversity Metric User Guide, a draft LNRS can be specified by a local planning authority for assigning strategic significance before the LNRS is published. Authorities would have the consultation draft approved version available from June 2025 (and effectively would have seen its content earlier).
3.7	Approval of the LNRS must follow certain stages. There must be a 28 day Intention to Consult period for Supporting Authorities (our councils and Natural England), followed by the public consultation, then revisions to the LNRS, sign off, and a final 28 day period of Intention to Approve. To approval the LNRS before the end of 2025 requires the following timetable. It would require a further delegation to the Committee from the CPCA Board to agree the final LNRS as there is not sufficient time to include publication of papers for an additional meeting. The preferred option is as follows:

	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th colspan="3">Option A: Approval by end of year 2025</th> </tr> <tr> <th>Milestone</th> <th>Time period</th> <th>Note</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>E&SC Committee</td> <td>June 2025</td> <td>First mtg after AGM populates Committee memberships</td> </tr> <tr> <td>28 days notice to Consult</td> <td>Mid-June to mid-July</td> <td>Requirement</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Consultation</td> <td>Mid July to mid-September</td> <td>Eight weeks consultation – following good practice of the bus reform consultation</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Review of LNRS</td> <td>Mid-September to end October</td> <td>Six weeks to consider responses and recommend any changes</td> </tr> <tr> <td>E&SC Committee approval</td> <td>November</td> <td>Agree LNRS</td> </tr> <tr> <td>28 days notice to Approve</td> <td>To 19 December</td> <td>Requirement</td> </tr> <tr> <td>LNRS Approved</td> <td>22 December</td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Option A: Approval by end of year 2025			Milestone	Time period	Note	E&SC Committee	June 2025	First mtg after AGM populates Committee memberships	28 days notice to Consult	Mid-June to mid-July	Requirement	Consultation	Mid July to mid-September	Eight weeks consultation – following good practice of the bus reform consultation	Review of LNRS	Mid-September to end October	Six weeks to consider responses and recommend any changes	E&SC Committee approval	November	Agree LNRS	28 days notice to Approve	To 19 December	Requirement	LNRS Approved	22 December	
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3.8	<p>Any LNRS consultation over the summer has challenges as it coincides with the particularly busy period for farmers. A shorter consultation of six weeks is not recommended on those grounds. An eight-week consultation would provide more than the minimum consultation period. It is considered that giving clear information that this will be coming and having a targeted campaign will allow these risks to be mitigated.</p> <p>A longer twelve-week consultation would take approval into 2026 as shown in 3.9 below.</p>																											
3.9	<p>An alternative option B has been considered that builds in a longer 12-week public consultation stage. Officers are not recommending this option B.</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th colspan="3">Option B: Approval by March 2026</th> </tr> <tr> <th>Milestone</th> <th>Time period</th> <th>Note</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>E&SC Committee</td> <td>June 2025</td> <td>First mtg after AGM populates Committee memberships</td> </tr> <tr> <td>28 days notice to Consult</td> <td>Mid-June to mid-July</td> <td>Requirement</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Consultation</td> <td>Mid July to mid-October</td> <td>Eight weeks consultation</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Review of LNRS</td> <td>Mid-October to end November</td> <td>Six weeks to consider responses and recommend any changes</td> </tr> <tr> <td>E&SC Committee approval</td> <td>January 2026</td> <td>Agree LNRS</td> </tr> <tr> <td>28 days notice to Approve</td> <td>To end February</td> <td>Requirement</td> </tr> <tr> <td>LNRS Approved</td> <td>1st March 2026</td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>A Board meeting approval has also not been included in this option. This is because, although a Board meeting is scheduled in March 2026, it then would extend the 28 days Intention to Approve period into 2026 local elections pre-election period. If the Board meeting was to be included, then Supporting Authorities would need to put in place appropriate arrangements to allow their decisions on the Notice to be taken during that period. The above Option B timetable results in an approval at the end of February 2026.</p>	Option B: Approval by March 2026			Milestone	Time period	Note	E&SC Committee	June 2025	First mtg after AGM populates Committee memberships	28 days notice to Consult	Mid-June to mid-July	Requirement	Consultation	Mid July to mid-October	Eight weeks consultation	Review of LNRS	Mid-October to end November	Six weeks to consider responses and recommend any changes	E&SC Committee approval	January 2026	Agree LNRS	28 days notice to Approve	To end February	Requirement	LNRS Approved	1 st March 2026	
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3.10	<p>A six-week period to assess and amend the draft LNRS based on the consultation has been assumed (Appendix A sets out the timetable). This will depend on the number of responses and their content. Six weeks assumes that no substantive additional technical work would need to be commissioned. The officer LNRS Steering Group consider this the minimum period necessary to make alterations.</p>																											
3.11	<p>Regarding governance, the E&SC Committee has oversight of the LNRS (with Board delegating to it responsibility to agree the draft Strategy). The CPCA's Strategic Planning Manager is the Senior Responsible Officer for the LNRS. Operationally, the work is project managed by the County Council with the support of the officer/stakeholder Steering Group. The County Council and Natural Cambridgeshire co-chair the Steering Group.</p>																											

3.12	A process of regularly reporting progress to the Place Directors has been established, to ensure that the technical work being undertaken in collaboration with all authorities receives appropriate resources from those authorities. A governance review is being undertaken to ensure effective delivery of the LNRS programme in 2025.
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4. Appendices

4.1	Appendix A: Timetable for review of LNRS
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5. Implications

Financial Implications

5.1	DEFRA have provided funding for the development of the strategy. This has been in three separate grant determinations, covering some exploratory funding in 22/23, followed by funding for the strategy development in 23/24 and 24/25 FY. The total awarded is £340,474 made up of £32,500 (22/23), £164,282 (23/24) and £143,692 (24/25). The Section 31 grant is not ring-fenced and the grant determination confirms it can be used if required in the 25/26 FY.
5.2	The County Council is providing the project management of the strategy. It has reviewed expenditure to date and has indicated that the project budget has capacity to extend some support into 25/26. This is currently forecast as £70,000.

Legal Implications

5.3	<p>The LNRS needs to be produced in compliance with the Environment Act 2021 (Local Nature Recovery Strategy) (Procedure) Regulations 2023: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2023/341/made</p> <p>The Public Sector Equality Duty under the Equality Act 2010 requires public authorities to have due regard to certain equality considerations when exercising their functions such as making decisions. S.149 - 157 of the Equality Act 2010 sets out the general duty and is supported by specific duties found in regulations.</p> <p>The general duty requires decision-makers to have 'due regard' to the need to eliminate conduct prohibited by the act, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations in relation to activities such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommending new or revised public policy to a Minister; • Publishing a consultation document; and • Designing and providing a public service <p>The Best Value Duty applies where authorities 'consider overall value, including economic, environmental, and social value when reviewing service provision'. In order to achieve the Best Value Duty, 'authorities remain under a duty to consult representatives of wide range of persons'. The duty to consult is not optional and section 3(2) of the Local Government Act 1999 provides details of those who should be engaged in consultations.</p>
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Public Health Implications

5.4	A diverse and thriving natural environment has public health benefits, including wellbeing.
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Environmental & Climate Change Implications

5.5	The delivery of the Strategy supports action to tackle the biodiversity crisis. Many measures to support habitats can have associated climate change benefits, including resilience to extreme weather events.
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Other Significant Implications

5.6	None.
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Background Papers

5.7	None.
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