

Principles of Nature recovery Networks across the South East of England

Prepared by South East Nature Partnerships

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Adopted in Principle

Will be reviewed as national guidance emerges

*South East Nature Partnership consists of Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) from **Kent, Sussex, Surrey, Hampshire and Isle of Wight** working together to form an influential partnership at the regional scale, to conserve and enhance the natural assets upon which the health, well-being and economic success of the region depends.*



What is a Nature Recovery Network - and what will it do?

In 2018, the Government launched an ambition to create a “Nature Recovery Network” (NRN). Set out within its 25 Year Environment Plan, the proposal for the network is designed to provide an integrated, spatial approach to nature’s recovery. It is based on the Lawton principle that in order to thrive, nature in this country needs bigger, better and joined areas of wildlife-rich habitat.

The government’s vision is for a **single, national network** improving and joining up wildlife-rich places (terrestrial, coastal and marine) across England in both rural and urban areas. But this national network will be created **locally**, with local nature recovery networks linking together to support nature’s recovery at the larger, national scale.

The mechanisms needed to create the network are to be established in law via the Environment Act, which at time of writing is in its draft Bill stage. These mechanisms include ‘**Local Nature Recovery Strategies**’ (LNRs), which will set out where and how local nature recovery networks will be created. Although the detail is not yet clear, the draft legislation proposes that the preparation of these strategies will be coordinated at a local level by public bodies (such as local authorities), who will be designated as the ‘**Responsible Authorities**’ by the Secretary of State.

The emerging framework for creation of the national NRN includes the following important broad aspirations and principles:

- The NRN will go beyond previous ideas of ‘ecological networks’ (which were focused primarily on delivering benefits for wildlife) and will deliver benefits for both **nature and people**.
- It will play an important role in improving landscape resilience to change and will assist in identifying actions for mitigating and adapting to climate change.
- The focus on nature and people within its planning and delivery, will emphasise the role of nature in underpinning the local economy and will dovetail with the ‘natural capital’ approach (such as that used by Local Nature Partnerships and their members across the South East).
- Its creation will focus on encouraging nature’s recovery across the landscape - not just within existing wildlife-rich habitat or designated sites. Thus, any areas where habitat can be created, expanded or improved for the benefit of nature and people can be brought into this network.

As noted above, whilst the NRN will ultimately be a national network, it will be **created locally** - working with the ecology, landscape and people living within local landscapes but ‘joining up’ and making sense across local boundaries. We support this approach and it is the intention of the South East Nature Partnership for an identifiable ‘Nature Recovery Network’ for the South East to be created this way, emerging from joined up and cohesive local networks created across this wider area.

Why do we need a NRN?

A healthy natural environment is at the heart of a healthy society and economy. It is our very life support system - providing us with clean water and air, a regulated climate, and secure fuel and food supplies. It provides us with beautiful places for respite and recreation, and enables all kinds of enterprise to thrive - both those directly connected to the land, including tourism, agriculture and forestry, but also high-tech and service industries which rely on our natural assets through their global supply chains and for the wellbeing of their employees.

Decades of development pressure, resources extraction, intensive agriculture and industrial production have contributed to a serious global decline in the healthy functioning of our natural environment, exacerbated by factors such as a changing climate, pollution, environmental degradation and invasive species. Between 1970 and 2019, 41% of species have declined in abundance in the UK, according to the most recent State of Nature report¹.

Safeguarding pockets of our remaining natural habitat is not enough. To reverse the declines in biodiversity and realise nature's recovery at scale, we need to work together and on a landscape scale to embed the Lawton principles of "Bigger, Better, More and Joined"² wildlife habitat in all our local, regional and national policies and strategies. This means protecting and enhancing our existing natural habitats, but also expanding them by restoring and creating new areas of species-rich habitat, and critically, ensuring they join up to create functional and resilient ecological networks that enable people and nature to thrive.

Losses of biodiversity and degradation of well-functioning ecosystems are also having a detrimental impact on our society and economy. As a result of the decline in our natural capital, we are seeing a related decline in the ability of our natural environment to provide important benefits and services, such as carbon storage, removal of pollution from the air and water, pollination, flood risk reduction and so on. Nature is working less well for society than it could do. The development of a Nature Recovery Network will thus help restore many of these ecosystem functions and improve the benefits to people - for individuals, our society and our economy³. It will increase the resilience of our landscapes in the face of a changing climate and has the potential to underpin efforts to establish a green economic recovery in the aftermath of Covid-19.

The **statutory basis of the Nature Recovery Network is key**. Its creation will flow directly from national policy and legislation which should confer significantly more strength to the concept of improving, expanding and joining-up our areas of important wildlife habitat than was previously granted to ecosystem networks, Biodiversity Opportunity Areas or other approaches to nature's recovery that have been developed over the past decades.

¹ RSPB (2019) State of Nature Report. https://www.rspb.org.uk/globalassets/images/campaigning-and-positions/let-nature-sing/birdsong-takeover/pdf/sonr/rspb_state-of-nature_summary-report_uk.pdf

² Defra (2010). *Making Space for Nature: a review of England's Wildlife Sites*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/making-space-for-nature-a-review-of-englands-wildlife-sites-published-today>

³ Natural England (2020). Nature Networks Evidence Handbook. NERR 081. www.gov.uk

What do we mean by supporting 'nature's recovery'?

"Every space in Britain must be used to help wildlife"
Sir David Attenborough

The following explanation of the vision behind a nature recovery network is provided by The Wildlife Trusts and explains why such a network is needed and why it requires thinking 'beyond protected sites' - and should be about bringing nature back into spaces and places across our landscape.

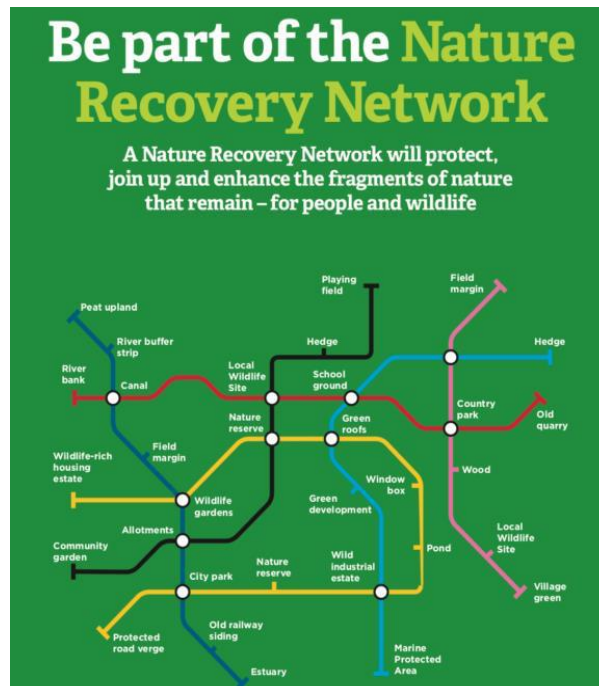
Nature conservation in the last century succeeded in protecting some vital wildlife sites. But still wildlife has declined.

Protected sites alone cannot meet the needs of wildlife or our society. To achieve that, we also need to provide effective protection for the many other places in the landscape that are still rich in wildlife despite the many pressures they face.

And we must invest time, effort, commitment and money into bringing wildlife back across a far wider area - stitching back together Britain's tattered natural fabric of wild land.

We need to create a Nature Recovery Network that extends into every part of our towns, cities and countryside, bringing wildlife and the benefits of a healthy natural world into every part of life. Letting flowers bloom along road verges, installing green roofs across city skylines, planting more street trees to give people shady walks in the summer, encouraging whole communities to garden for wild plants and animals.

The Wildlife Trusts. <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/nature-recovery-network>



Local Nature Recovery Strategies: the ‘what, where and how’

As noted above, the draft Environment Bill introduces **Local Nature Recovery Strategies** as the means through which a spatial, strategic blueprint for nature’s recovery will be defined for a local area. These strategies will identify **what, where and how** wildlife-rich habitats should be improved, restored or created at the local scale for the benefit of nature and people.

Whilst there is still uncertainty as to the administrative scale at which these will be prepared, and where the responsibility will lie for their production⁴, across the South-East the Local Nature Partnerships and their partners will work together to prepare **local habitat maps** at the **county scale** to guide the identification of the local elements of a NRN. These will identify the following key elements of a Nature Recovery Network:

- **Core sites** (already designated for nature conservation) and other wildlife-rich places which are vital refuges for wildlife in our landscape and must be protected as the foundation of the network
- Where and how these sites can be **expanded in size and/or improved in quality** to better support wildlife.
- Where **new wildlife habitat** can be restored or created across the landscape and within towns, cities, coastline and marine habitats in order to **better connect sites** (thus helping wildlife populations grow and move) or to create new areas of wildlife-rich habitat
- Areas where there is potential to use **natural solutions** (such as habitat creation or improvement) to provide a raft of ecosystem services of value to people such as carbon storage and sequestration, reduced flooding, improved soil, clean water and clean air
- Where existing and new areas of **natural accessible green space** can directly enable people to enjoy and connect with nature where they live, work and play - benefitting health and wellbeing whilst also supporting nature.

The above will be underpinned by the principle that **all spaces have the potential to contribute positively to nature’s recovery**. The LNPs across the South East will encourage this principle to be embedded in the planning of NRNs, so that its vision is broad and stretches beyond protected sites and greenspaces, to achieving more nature and wildlife across the wider rural, urban, coastal and marine environments of the South East.

A strategic land use decision making tool

The Local Nature Recovery Strategies will provide a much-needed spatial strategic framework for targeting activity and resources where they will make the greatest impact for nature and people. In our view, these strategies should be used for embedding nature within local place-making and land use decision-making. It is particularly important that they:

- Guide the application of **mandatory biodiversity net gain** - identifying where new habitat creation should be located to provide the greatest strategic benefit for nature.

⁴ The ‘responsible authorities’ for preparing LNRS will be identified by the Secretary of State.

- Guide the management and creation of **green infrastructure** within communities and new developments
- Target biodiversity **conservation action and natural capital investment**
- Identify where and how **'natural solutions'** can be used for climate change mitigation and adaptation - which in turn can be implemented locally via climate change planning processes
- Inform future **development allocations** to ensure that key links in the network are not severed by inappropriately located development, and that sustainably designed developments positively contribute to the network.

Used in this way, these strategies will add to and support the existing work already carried out by LNP members across the South East to respond to opportunities to work with landowners and others on habitat creation and improvement as they arise. They will provide the coherent vision within which all efforts - big and small, urban and rural - can fit and contribute to an uplift in nature across the South East.

Developing a Nature Recovery Network for the South East

The following principles will guide the preparation of **Local Nature Recovery Strategies** and delivery of a **Nature Recovery Network** across the South East:

1. **Local level thinking on where and how to deliver the NRN in the South East has started and will progress in alignment with emerging national frameworks**

Across the South East, the Local Nature Partnerships are well positioned to use local data and expertise to create preliminary habitat maps and carry out initial assessments of the local drivers and needs of both nature and people. Therefore, while acknowledging the wider national level discussion, we will not wait for final national policy guidance but will proceed to develop local thinking about where and how local nature recovery networks should and could be created. These local approaches will be flexible and so can be evolved as a national framework becomes clearer. Any lessons learned from the South East will be shared with those in Natural England and Defra developing the national level guidance.

2. **County-scale analysis and mapping will be prepared to guide the preparation of future Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS)**

As LNPs operate at a **county scale**, we will progress work **on the development of county-scale analysis and local habitat maps** which can then be used in the development of Local Nature Recovery Strategies once the mechanism and scale for these has been formally identified by government. The LNPs will also start to identify and engage with locally specific stakeholders, to ensure a wide range of voices and actors are drawn into the process at an early stage. This approach can be adapted and evolved as government guidance becomes clearer and more detailed.

3. LNPs across the South East will play a key role in creating a collaborative and ‘joined up’ approach to the planning and delivery of the NRN across the region.

The planning and delivery of Nature Recovery Networks will require strong, long term support and engagement from a wide range of stakeholders, including farmers, political leaders, local planning authorities, government agencies, businesses, NGOs, community interest groups and the general public. The intention within the draft legislation and emerging policy, is for the creation of a NRN within a local area to be a shared undertaking with broad stakeholder involvement. As existing multi-disciplinary partnerships, LNPs are well placed to encourage a collaborative approach to the creation of NRNs and will do what they can to facilitate broad stakeholder engagement in the mapping and planning processes for NRNs within their county areas.

Local Nature Partnerships will also encourage join-up between existing strategies (such as those for wildlife, people and nature, natural capital, green infrastructure and so on) and the emerging NRN thinking in their area - to ensure that the vision and strategies for delivery of the NRN coordinate and integrate existing thinking and analysis and add value through bringing these together.

Finally, as nature and natural processes operate at various scales, Nature Recovery Networks must be planned and delivered in a way that reflects this and ensures ‘join up’ across administrative boundaries.

- Individual **LNPs** will assist with join-up across boundaries within their own geographies (for example, between districts and across districts/protected area boundaries).
- At a larger scale, **the South East Nature Partnership** will facilitate communication and collaboration across county boundaries to ensure that county-level visions and mapping exercises are consistently linked at the wider regional scale and form the basis of large, landscape-scale partnership approaches to nature’s recovery spanning county boundaries. This join-up will require specific effort to accommodate the fact that each county area may use slightly different methodologies to develop their local habitat map due to the nuances of locally available data, local priorities and resources.

4. The NRN will incorporate our existing terrestrial and coastal habitats - and where possible, identify how to support creation of a marine NRN in the waters along the coastline of the South East.

The NRN for the South East will not be restricted to terrestrial habitats, but will also incorporate the many coastal habitats found along the shores of the region, many of which are increasingly fragmented and under threat. Whilst coastal squeeze may further threaten these habitats and constrain options for future habitat creation, much more can be done to identify how these habitats can be better protected, expanded and enhanced in the future.

Thinking and policy on how to create a **marine** Nature Recovery Network is still evolving⁵, but across the South East, the LNPs will work with marine conservation organisations to incorporate their ideas and ensure that the marine environment is reflected in the overall vision, mapping and design of Nature Recovery Networks across the South East.

5. The NRN will include urban greenspaces and other elements of green infrastructure as key elements of the network, providing an important role in providing wildlife refuges and other ecosystem services within urban areas and acting as spaces for people to connect to nature.

Urban greenspaces and green infrastructure - from parks, recreational areas on one hand to verges, walls, civic spaces, urban trees and green roofs - are an essential component of a Nature Recovery Network, particularly in the densely populated areas of the South East, where habitats are fragmented and many local communities have few opportunities to access natural green spaces near their homes. Development of a NRN for the South East will give special emphasis to the role of the range of green spaces and other elements of green infrastructure within urban areas and will seek opportunities to improve both their quality and quantity, target action where it is needed most and develop new habitat linkages between sites to enhance their function as a connected network.

6. The NRN will support the recovery of both habitats and species

At the ecological level, a the NRN for the South East will be designed to do more than simply expand and link core habitats - but will aspire to support thriving and resilient populations of all our native wildlife species.

7. The NRN will reflect that nature's life support systems are foundational - and that our 'natural capital' must be protected and enhanced as a means of providing benefits to people and nature

Natural capital in England is in long-term decline, which is proving detrimental to both society and the economy⁶. Creation of a NRN across the South East will make a vital contribution to the protection and enhancement of the **natural capital assets** of the region and therefore the flow of benefits and services this natural capital provides for people and the economy, such as climate regulation, pollination, water and soil health, air quality, and health and wellbeing benefits.

At a more local level, delivery of a NRN will also provide opportunities to use '**nature based solutions**' in specific locations. These are innovative habitat creation and improvement approaches which will help to address specific environmental and economic risks such as

⁵ Note: national guidance is in place for preparation of nature recovery networks for terrestrial and coastal habitats (NE 2020 handbook) but work is still underway to identify how an equivalent network can be identified and established in the marine environment [check: is this accurate]

⁶ Natural Capital Committee (2015). The State of Natural Capital. Protecting and Improving Natural Capital for Prosperity and Wellbeing. Third Report to the Economic Affairs Committee.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/516725/ncc-state-natural-capital-third-report.pdf

poor water quality, flood risk and soil erosion and air pollution. These ‘win-win’ approaches create new natural capital assets which deliver direct benefits for both people and nature.

Protection of and investment in natural capital is not only required to ensure that vital benefits and services we receive from nature continue to flow, but will also make important direct contributions to job creation and a ‘greener’ economic recovery for the South East.

8. The NRN will promote resilience and adaptability to a changing climate

The NRN for the South East will be designed to enable nature and people to thrive in a changing climate. This means creating the right space for native species to adapt, while acknowledging that climate change will bring new species. In planning the NRN, it will be important to consider how the natural environment contributes to climate change resilience and adaptation. The network will drive a more connected, landscape-scale approach to identifying and implementing natural climate solutions.

9. Local Nature Recovery Strategies will acknowledge and include the special role of our protected landscapes in delivering nature’s recovery within their own boundaries whilst ensuring that they link to and support the wider nature recovery networks they sit within.

The Protected Landscapes across the South East include the South Downs National Park, the New Forest National Park, the Chichester Harbour Conservancy and the following Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB): High Weald AONB; Surrey Hills AONB; Kent Downs AONB; and Isle of Wight AONB . These areas have a particular role in the protection of nature and landscapes and in the connection of people and nature. The planning and delivery of a Nature Recovery Network across the South East will reflect their specific roles and purposes whilst also ensuring coherence in the protection and recovery of nature across and beyond their boundaries.

10. In seeking to design a NRN that works for both people and nature, LNRSs must set out the innovative and ambitious approaches that will help to balance these twin objectives whilst remaining firmly rooted in a commitment to halting the decline in nature and securing its recovery.

A Nature Recovery Network is not simply an ecological network - it must be designed from the start with the needs of both **nature and people** in mind. Balancing these twin objectives will require innovation and an understanding of:

- Where interventions are needed to support nature’s recovery - through greater protection, reduction of threats, improvement of habitat quality, increasing connectivity and so on
- Where ‘natural solutions’ can be used to both create and improve habitat whilst also delivering benefits for individuals, society and the wider economy - and where the opportunities for applications of these processes lie within the LNRS area
- At a larger scale, where and how ‘multi-functional landscapes’ can be created which support farmers and landowners whilst also supporting nature, natural processes, scenic beauty and access to nature

- Where people need greater access to nature and where and how deficits in this can be delivered through the planning system and development design.

However, underpinning this innovative and multi-functional approach will be a commitment to ensuring that the LNRs produced across the South East do in fact contain the ambition and interventions required to achieve nature's recovery as a fundamental and guiding objective.