Nature Recovery Network Project

Emerging Insights Snapshot Report

In conversation with early adopter local authorities

Update 13th December 2022

Contents

1. Background and scope

This piece of work is part of a wider PAS [project](#) funded by Natural England running from August 2022 to the end of March 2023 engaging with local authorities to raise awareness and understanding of:

- The importance and value of recovering nature to help to address three of the biggest challenges we face: climate change, biodiversity loss and wellbeing.
- Their new duties relating to nature recovery under the Environment Act 2021.
- How Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) help to establish the priorities for funding and partnership that will support delivery of the Nature Recovery Network.
- How they can support partnership-based delivery.

From August to November 2022, we held conversations with 20 early adopter local authorities to understand their thinking about the new system for delivering nature recovery including purpose, process, opportunities, challenges and support required.

The early adopter local authorities were identified as those specifically developing or have developed nature recovery plans and projects. Local authority leads were contacted to arrange an interview and sent a set of guiding questions in advance to provide a sense of structure whilst also keeping the conversation as informal as possible.

A total of 41 officers attended the conversations and a list of local authorities is set out in Appendix 1.

These conversations were synthesised and summarised into an initial emerging insights snapshot report. This report was shared at two roundtable events on 11th and 17th November and constructive criticism was encouraged.

The emerging insights set out in the updated report were then tested as part of a PAS [event](#) held on 8th December attended by over 300 local authority officers. It was clear from polls undertaken during the event that there was clear support for the emerging insights which have been re-sequenced to reflect audience priorities as well as adding 'data, evidence, skills and expertise' to the list of emerging insights.

As a result of these conversations PAS has also started to pull together a mini library of good examples where early adopter local authorities are delivering nature recovery activities in a creative and pragmatic way. The mini library is available on our project [webpage](#).

2. Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the local authority officers who participated in these conversations and roundtable events for the time and expertise they gave. The officers contributed their own opinions, based on experience, and are not necessarily the formal views of their authority.

We are also grateful to Natural England for funding this project and providing a great deal of their time, expertise and support as part of the project steering group.

3. Key insights

Given that the system for delivering nature recovery is going through a number of changes and the context of uncertainty that this brings responses are often expressed as concerns, questions and issues.

However, there was a real desire amongst participants to make sure nature recovery activities are successfully delivered with some excellent suggestions and examples of how this is currently being achieved.

Similarly, the Government's shift in relation to nature recovery was especially welcome and there is a collective sense that we are at the beginning of something new and important.From our engagement with the early adopter local authorities and feedback from the recent PAS [event](#) on 8th December we think these conversations can be brought together into six insights and "asks" from local authorities which are set out in priority order below:

1. Clarity and certainty of funding nature recovery
2. Embedding nature into wider corporate priorities
3. The importance of regulations, guidance and governance
4. The value of coordination and partnerships
5. The variety of frameworks and timetables
6. Our audience identified a clear need for evidence, skills and expertise (additional insight)

Each of these is explored more fully in the following table.

Insight	Explanation	What do local authorities need?
1. Clarity and certainty of funding nature recovery		
Staff, capacity, funding and recruitment all remain big issues for local authorities and a key barrier to the delivery of nature recovery activities.	• Putting together a pipeline of nature recovery projects takes time and resources to pull together and deliver on the ground. • Some local authorities have been successful in securing seed and revenue funding such as Defra's Natural Environment Investment Readiness Fund (NEIRF) which provided much needed capacity and resourcing to get project proposals off the ground. • Whilst funding opportunities exist resource constraints and council processes have meant that not all councils been able to develop a set of robust proposals which meet specific funder requirements and short timescales for submission. • In some instances capital has been available for habitat creation but not the resources for maintenance. Issues have been identified around supporting sites in private ownership, creating new infrastructure and greening previously grey areas at scale. • Some local authorities are further ahead than others in their thinking about how different funding streams and financial models fit together. Some are pooling new burdens funding whilst others are encouraging blended finance at a senior level and building into their business cases such as highways funding. • Invest to save cases have been used to secure additional resources and budget for delivery through internal or external funding. • Uncertainties in the market caused by rescheduling of new funding streams such as biodiversity net gain and environmental land management schemes have made it difficult to engage with investors, buyers and suppliers and bring nature recovery projects forward.	To achieve the governments ambitions for nature recovery local authorities need clarity about what funding is available and how to bring this together to support delivery, including (a) initial seed funding to get strategies and projects in place and then (b) the more longer term sustainable business models to deliver those strategies and projects on the ground.

2. Embedding nature into wider corporate priorities		
Some local authorities are more advanced than others in their approaches to embedding the opportunities from nature as part of wider corporate priorities and delivering shared outcomes.	- Awareness and understanding about the importance and value of nature in addressing key challenges varies across local authorities and their departments. - When viewed against national priorities such as the cost-of-living crisis or the growth agenda the benefits from nature can be overlooked or seen as a barrier. - Natural capital accounts have been used by some local authorities to better understand the importance and value of nature and achieving political and corporate buy-in. - A number of local authorities have declared climate emergencies and in some instances biodiversity emergencies as well. - Local authorities have recognised that the climate and biodiversity emergencies are inextricably linked and deliver good environmental outcomes. - Local authority structures have included traditional senior level roles including planning, highways, regeneration making it difficult to compete for funding for nature recovery activities. - In some instances local authority services have been restructured with new teams aligned and posts created including natural capital and nature recovery leads. - Some local authorities have found it difficult to understand the requirements of the Environment Act new duties and what they are expected to do to deliver them.	Once local authorities have declared climate and biodiversity commitments they need examples from early adopters showing how they can firmly embed these into corporate priorities which can be applied across the authority and then used to deliver shared outcomes.

3. The importance of regulations, guidance and governance		
Local authorities are waiting for LNRS regulations and guidance whilst others have been pressing ahead in different ways including preparatory work to inform their vision and priorities.	• Local authorities have felt unclear about what the LNRS means in practice including geographical coverage, interaction with the land use planning context and how they fit with other strategies, plans and frameworks. • Local authorities have identified the need for strong partnership working and join up between all local authority levels on what they will need to do to deliver the vision and priorities. • The LNRS pilots have helped to build relationships with key stakeholders including with their district councils. • In some places nature recovery mapping has already been used to inform their vision and priorities and the production of local plans.	Local authorities need to understand the governance arrangements that need to be in place and how they work in practice to support LNRS delivery. This includes the need for strong partnership working and join up between all local authority levels as well as alignment between LNRS and local plans.

4. The value of coordination and partnerships		
There is an increasing appetite amongst councils to work strategically across departments and with external stakeholders to deliver wider benefits and new funding models.	• Local authorities have been supporting partnership working for some time which includes providing capacity, resourcing and leadership • Local authorities consider the coordinator role as being particularly important in drawing together multiple stakeholders, projects and funding bids but is often not funded. • Community engagement and climate awareness have been used to identify positive action at grass roots level with a clear role for communities and local partnerships. • Often local authorities have drawn on the voluntary sector to link with development opportunities. • Farmers and landowners have been increasingly seen as important stakeholders to engage with and support delivery of nature recovery activities including the setting up of farm clusters. • Various partner organisations have access to different funding pots and lever in other types of funding so often this has involved changing the mindset of the wider local authority, councillors and senior officers to understand the benefits of working in this way.	Local authorities would benefit from examples and business cases from early adopters showing how investing time and resources in the coordination and leadership of partnerships across local authorities and with a range of external stakeholders can be beneficial for nature recovery, deliver shared outcomes and lever in additional funding.

5. The variety of frameworks and timetables		
A range of nature recovery policies and initiatives generate their own approach, governance and timeframes which means that local authorities are approaching delivery in different ways and at different times.	• Without an established nature recovery framework some local authorities have been working out the process for delivery for themselves with some further ahead than others. • Often delivery has been quite reactive and influenced by legislative requirements or windows of opportunity such as the introduction of mandatory biodiversity net gain, funding calls such as Natural Environment Investment Readiness Funding or new pilots such as local nature recovery strategies. • Some local authorities have identified the need for an integrated approach to meet nature recovery goals engaging people with nature in a meaningful way and maximising the benefits for people and place. • Nature recovery activities have often involved the delivery of long-term projects requiring long term political commitments and funding linked to the bigger picture and with no regrets.	Exploratory work needs to start setting out how planning better for the environment needs to work from a local authority's perspective. This needs to bring together the various reforms and policy agendas from Defra and DLUHC to include digital, local plans, Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS), protected sites, Biodiversity Net Gain, NERC duties, environmental outcomes, data, engagement, monitoring and reporting.

6. Our audience identified a clear need for evidence, skills and expertise (additional insight)		
Our audience identified a clear need for data and evidence to inform the development and delivery of nature recovery activities as well as the necessary skills and expertise to be in place to use this technical information.	Whilst there was a clear level of support for the insights identified at the PAS event held on 8th December the audience felt that data and evidence were missing as well as the necessary skills and capacity needed to support delivery. The following issues and concerns were specifically identified: Data and evidence • Lack of good environmental data (quantitative, qualitative and spatial) including variability of quality and resolution nationwide. • Access to information including a requirement for solid and robust data sourcing that is open source and how this process is managed in two tier areas. • Coordinating data and evidence across boundaries at a strategic level. • Calibration of natural capital accounting and how LPAs can address this. Skills and expertise • Resources (staff, skills, time) and capacity in teams to create baseline, to review submitted assessments, to monitor and to plan for future needs. • GIS capability, particularly with partnership working, consultation and engagement. • Need for pool of trained landscape architects, environmental economists and ecologists. • Translation of information from ecology sections to planning/infrastructure sections and communicating requirements to applicants. • Setting out the key supporting roles of statutory bodies of Natural England, but also Environment Agency and Forestry Commission. • These have been included as part of an additional sixth insight to be taken forward as part of the emerging insights and recommendations identified above.	Local authorities need access to consistent, up to date and reliable data as well as the right skills and expertise to interpret and use this as evidence to inform future policies, decision making, monitoring and reporting.

Appendix 1: In Conversation Local Authorities

Bath and North East Somerset Council

Birmingham City Council

Bolsover District Council

Cambridgeshire County Council

Cornwall Council

Cumbria County Council

Doncaster Council

Durham County Council

Essex County Council

Greater Manchester Combined Authority

Hampshire County Council

Haringey Council

Islington Council

North Devon Council

South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse DC Stroud District Council

Stroud District Council

Tees Valley Combined Authority

Warwickshire County Council

West of England Combined Authority

West Midlands Combined Authority