



## **CABINET – 17 DECEMBER 2024**

### **DRAFT LOCAL NATURE RECOVERY STRATEGY**

#### **REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT**

### **PART A**

#### **Purpose of the Report**

1. The purpose of the report is to present to the Cabinet the draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland and the supporting LNRS webpages, and to seek the Cabinet's approval for an 8-week public consultation on the draft LNRS.
2. The draft LNRS is attached as Appendix A to this report. A link to auxiliary LNRS webpages with the Local Habitat Maps and supporting information is attached as Appendix B to this report.

#### **Recommendations**

3. It is recommended that the Cabinet:
  - a) Approves the draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for the public consultation;
  - b) Notes that a further report will be considered by the Cabinet in June 2025, detailing the outcome of the consultation, and seeking approval of the final LNRS for publication.

#### **Reasons for Recommendation**

4. LNRSs are a new statutory duty placed on local government in England, as part of the Environment Act 2021. The Act requires local authorities to work together to develop LNRSs across 48 areas in England.
5. Under the Environment Act 2021, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs appointed Leicestershire County Council the 'responsible authority' for the development of a LNRS for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.

6. The development of the draft LNRS fulfils part of the duty, as does the need to go out to public consultation.

### **Timetable for Decisions (including Scrutiny)**

7. The Environment and Climate Change Overview and Scrutiny Committee will receive a report on 22 January 2025 as part of the consultation process and any comments received will be considered when finalising the LNRS.

### **Policy Framework and Previous Decisions**

8. The new statutory duty fits with the aims and objectives of the Council's Environment Strategy 2018-2030, in particular those in relation to Biodiversity, Habitats and the Local Environment. It also fits with the Council's Strategic Plan Refresh 2024-2026 priorities, in particular those under the 'Clean and Green' Outcome. Furthermore, it supports the Council's Net Zero 2050 Strategy and Action Plan.
9. The strengthened biodiversity duty, also introduced under the Environment Act 2021, which requires public bodies, including local authorities, to 'conserve and enhance biodiversity', will support delivery of the LNRS. The Council's Biodiversity Duty Plan is the subject of a separate report for consideration by the Cabinet at this meeting.
10. Development of the LNRS will identify the nature priorities for the area, while implementation of the proposed measures will support the protection and recovery of nature and contribute to the Government's national environmental targets as well as the UK's international biodiversity commitment to protect and conserve 30% of the UK's land and sea for biodiversity by 2030.

### **Resource Implications**

11. Leicestershire County Council will receive 'new burdens' funding for taking on the role as the responsible authority in the form of a Section 31 grant. The amount of funding provided was calculated using a national formula with Leicestershire County Council receiving £337,741 over two years (2023/24 – 2024/25). This is in addition to the almost £49,000 received over 2021/22 and 2022/23.
12. The funding provided is being used for developing the LNRS and is being spent on employing a project manager and specialist support, as well as ensuring that full and proper engagement takes place with partners, stakeholders and residents.
13. The total expenditure in 2023/24 was £76,432, with forecasted expenditure of £220,000 in 2024/25. Expenditure for 2024/25 to-date is approximately £100,000.
14. Further new burdens funding is expected to be provided by the Government to support the delivery of the LNRS and to undertake future reviews of the LNRS

(timescales to be determined by the Government). However, at this point, no details have been provided. The Government expects projects identified within the LNRS to be delivered through mechanisms such as the Environmental Land Management Scheme, Biodiversity Net Gain and specific grant schemes.

15. The Director of Corporate Resources and the Director of Law and Governance have been consulted on the content of this report.

### **Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure**

16. This report will be circulated to all members.

### **Officers to Contact**

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## **PART B**

### **Background**

17. As part of the Environment Act 2021, the Government introduced the requirement to develop LNRSs across England. There are 48 LNRS areas across England.
18. This new mandatory system of spatial strategies will map the most valuable existing areas for nature, establish priorities and map proposals for specific actions to drive nature's recovery and wider environmental benefits. Each draft strategy must go out to public consultation and then be agreed by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.
19. In March 2022, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) approached higher tier councils to take on the responsible authority role as part of the new LNRS duty. Leicestershire County Council agreed on a provisional, non-binding basis to be the responsible authority for the LNRS area which covers Leicestershire, Leicester City and Rutland.
20. Between March 2022 and March 2023, the Government put in place a national framework to enable the preparation of LNRSs to commence. This included confirming strategy boundaries and formally agreeing the roles of the responsible authority to lead in each area.
21. The official regulations and guidance on LNRS were released on 23 March 2023. The regulations and guidance provided details on the appointment of responsible authorities, the creation of the role of 'supporting authorities', and what was required in developing and publishing LNRSs.
22. Defra sent a formal letter to all provisional responsible authorities, including Leicestershire County Council, in mid-May 2023 to notify them that they had been appointed as the responsible authority for their respective LNRS area.

### **Development of the Draft LNRS**

23. The development of the draft LNRS required Leicestershire County Council to work in partnership with neighbouring authorities, including Leicester City Council, Rutland Council and the district councils, as well as other public bodies such as the Environment Agency, Forestry Commission and the National Forest Company.
24. Under the Environment (Local Nature Recovery Strategies) (Procedure) Regulations 2023, the role of the supporting authority was created, and it required responsible authorities to "take reasonable steps to involve" supporting authorities, "have regard" to their opinions, share information with them and seek their agreement before consultation and publication of the finalised LNRS. Locally, the supporting authorities are Leicester City Council, Rutland Council, the seven district councils and Natural England.

25. A governance structure was established to support the development of the draft LNRS. It consisted of a Steering Group, made up of the Leicestershire County Council as the responsible authority, the supporting authorities of Leicester City Council, Rutland Council, the seven district councils and Natural England, as well as the Defra bodies of the Environment Agency, Forestry Commission and the National Forest Company.
26. The Steering Group was supported by a Strategic Reference Group and a number of thematic working groups consisting of key partners and stakeholders including representatives from the supporting authorities and the Defra bodies, the National Farmers Union, Countryside Land Managers Association, Leicestershire & Rutland Wildlife Trust, and Trent Rivers Trust (a full list of the partners and stakeholders involved in the development of the draft LNRS have been referenced in Appendix A).
27. A programme of communication and engagement was undertaken to promote the work to develop the LNRS, and to encourage stakeholders and residents to get involved to enable them to share their expertise, knowledge and views so as to develop a LNRS that was co-created by those that both had an interest in nature's recovery and would be affected by the efforts to recover nature.
28. The engagement programme included a survey of residents which asked about their attitudes and access to nature with 1,077 responses being received. A separate survey for stakeholders, farmers and landowners was also conducted with 96 responses received. In addition, an interactive map was provided which allowed residents, partners, stakeholders, farmers, and landowners to make comments on where existing activity was happening for nature, where there was an opportunity to do more for nature, or where there were pressures on nature. Some 516 comments were placed on the map.
29. The engagement programme also included a series of farmer/landowner and resident workshops across the LNRS area. These allowed the sharing of the results of the surveys and the interactive map, and the early thinking on possible nature priorities and measures to achieve the priorities. The workshops provided an opportunity to discuss these, identify areas of agreement and consensus, as well as areas that needed further work.
30. Alongside the engagement programme, specialist support was provided by a data analysis and mapping consultancy to allow for the processing and mapping of the collected data sources. This included the development of separate data layers and the use of modelling software to create opportunity maps of where nature could be conserved and enhanced. From these a local habitat map was developed, as well as a series of maps that contributed to the identification of the priority areas for nature.
31. An analysis of almost 100 existing strategies and plans from across the area was undertaken to identify priorities and objectives which could either contribute to the development of the LNRS or which the LNRS could support in delivering.

32. The combination of all the above elements contributed to the production of the draft LNRS.

### **Overview of LNRS Contents**

33. The necessary contents of the LNRS are largely set out in the official LNRS guidance, with strategies required to meet certain criteria in order for Natural England to approve it as ready to go out to public consultation. The LNRS consists of two key components: the LNRS strategy document and auxiliary webpages that include an interactive copy of the Local Habitat Map and supporting information.
34. The draft LNRS for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland was presented to a Natural England panel on 8 October 2024. The panel found that the LNRS had met all the criteria, however, some minor amendments to be made to the document and the webpages were suggested to improve their readability and functionality.
35. Of the five LNRSs that have been presented to a Natural England panel to-date, the draft LNRS for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland was the first one to pass without a 'formal pause' being placed on the LNRS, before it was approved by Natural England to go out for public consultation.
36. The amendments were made to the designed version of the LNRS and the updated webpages were presented to a Natural England sub-panel on 5 November 2024 for approval, with the draft LNRS receiving approval to go out to public consultation.
37. The key components of the LNRS are:
- a) The setting out of the overall strategic aims of the strategy;
  - b) The area description, which describes the natural landscape and how people have shaped the landscape;
  - c) An assessment of the current state of nature across the area, including a presentation in map form of the existing areas of particular importance for biodiversity (located on supporting LNRS webpages);
  - d) A presentation of the key environmental considerations, such as future pressures and wider environmental issues;
  - e) A presentation in map form of the areas that could become of importance for biodiversity and the wider environment (located on supporting LNRS webpages);
  - f) The setting out of the main biodiversity priorities and measures, that will take place within the priority areas as well as the landscape scale (area wide) priorities and measures;
  - g) The setting out of the key factors needed to support delivery of the LNRS;
  - h) A suite of appendices providing supporting information and technical detail.
38. The LNRS ultimately serves as a call to action for all sectors of society to play a role in the recovery of nature, ensuring that the biodiversity and natural beauty

of Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland can thrive for future generations, while at the same time supporting the lives and livelihoods of the people and communities that live and work there.

### **Draft LNRS Approval Process**

39. The draft LNRS was issued to the supporting authorities on 4 October 2024 under Regulation 7 of the Environment (Local Nature Recovery Strategies) (Procedure) Regulations 2023.
40. Under Regulation 9, the supporting authorities have 28 days to raise an objection with the responsible authority regarding the draft LNRS. Following this period, the Council has received no objections.
41. The draft LNRS has been through the individual approval processes of the supporting authorities and the Defra bodies to approve the draft LNRS to go out to public consultation.
42. Approval of the draft LNRS by the Cabinet is the last stage of the process and will enable the draft LNRS to go out to public consultation.

### **Consultation**

43. A public consultation on the draft LNRS is scheduled to take place between 6 January – 28 February 2025.
44. The public consultation will seek to engage with residents from across the LNRS area, partner organisations, and stakeholders such as farmers, landowners, planning officers, representatives of environmental organisations. An online briefing session will also be held for Elected Members from across the LNRS area.
45. The public consultation will utilise the Council's 'Have your say' website. The Council will also work with the supporting authorities, other partners and stakeholders to promote the consultation.
46. The draft LNRS will be presented to the Environment and Climate Change Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 22 January 2025 as part of the public consultation and Committee's comments will be taken into consideration when finalising the LNRS.

### **Equality Implications**

47. There are no equality implications arising from the contents of this report.
48. There will be equality implications arising from the implementation of the LNRS and an Equality Impact Assessment, attached as Appendix C, was carried out as part of the process. This identified key areas where equality implications are likely to arise and highlighted the need to address these at the relevant point of implementation of the measures within the LNRS.

### **Human Rights Implications**

49. There are no human rights implications arising from the contents of this report.

### **Environmental Implications**

50. The development and implementation of the LNRS should have a significant positive impact on the local environment, in that its intended purpose is to support the recovery of nature as well as provide for additional environmental benefits such as improved water and air quality, reduced flood risk, and increased capture and storage of carbon emissions.

### **Risk Assessment**

51. The project risk assessment has been updated. The key risks remaining after existing control measures have been taken are:
- a) Insufficient funding to implement the LNRS,
  - b) Reputational damage to the Council as the responsible authority.
52. Currently, funding has only been provided for the development of the LNRS, though it is expected that there will be sufficient underspend to support the development of an initial delivery plan. An announcement on the future new burdens funding for the LNRS is currently awaited. This is expected after the Government's next spending review.
53. Implementation of the measures within the LNRS are expected to be partially funded through mechanisms such as Biodiversity Net Gain, the Environmental Land Management Scheme, Natural Flood Management projects and other investment such as philanthropic donations, future Government, or other grants. However, funding will be needed to cover the costs of managing the implementation of the LNRS, supporting the governance of the LNRS, as well as the future review of the LNRS.
54. While it is considered that the reputation of the Council has been enhanced by the professional and collaborative approach taken in developing the draft LNRS, there remains the risk of reputational damage for the Council in its role as the responsible authority, were any of the supporting authorities or key stakeholders to raise any concerns about the draft LNRS during the consultation phase. Furthermore, there is the risk of reputational damage should any difficulties arise in delivering the measures set out in the LNRS, once it is approved in July 2025.
55. Both these risks will be mitigated by regular and professional communication and engagement with Defra, supporting authorities, partners and stakeholders, and adopting a collaborative and collective approach to the development and delivery of the LNRS. The Responsible Authority Network (established by Defra, brings the responsible authorities together on a national and regional basis to support each other in developing their respective LNRS and to provide



feedback to Defra) will also be used to lobby Defra to ensure sufficient funding is provided as well as clarity on how the LNRS is expected to be delivered.

### **Background Papers**

Report to the Cabinet on 26 May 2024, Local Nature Recovery Strategy Responsible Authority Status:

<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=135&MId=7076&Ver=4>  
(item 237)

Environment (Local Nature Recovery Strategies) (Procedure) Regulations 2023:

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2023/341/made>

### **Appendices**

Appendix A: Draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Leicestershire, Leicester & Rutland

Appendix B: Link to auxiliary LNRS webpages with Local Habitat maps and supporting information:

<https://haveyoursay.leicestershire.gov.uk/local-nature-recovery-strategy-local-habitat-map>

Appendix C: LNRS Equality Impact Assessment

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