

**CABINET – 17 JUNE 2025****LOCAL NATURE RECOVERY STRATEGY FOR LEICESTERSHIRE,
LEICESTER AND RUTLAND****REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT****PART A****Purpose of the Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to advise the Cabinet of the outcome of public consultation on the draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland and seek the Cabinet's agreement for its submission to Council for approval.
2. 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. LNRSs are a new England-wide system of plans designed to drive nature recovery and provide environmental benefits by identifying the most valuable areas for wildlife, mapping opportunities for nature improvement and prioritising local actions.
3. The final LNRS is attached as Appendix A to this report. The LNRS Local Habitat Map is attached as Appendix B to this report.

Recommendations

4. It is recommended that:
 - a) The outcome of consultation on the draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) including comments of the Environment and Climate Change Overview and Scrutiny Committee be noted;
 - b) The LNRS is submitted to the Council meeting on 2 July 2025 for approval;
 - c) The Director of Environment and Transport, following consultation with the Cabinet Lead Member, is authorised to make any final amendments to the draft LNRS and supporting documents prior to its submission to the Council meeting.

(Key Decision)

Reasons for Recommendation

5. Leicestershire County Council is the 'responsible authority' for the development of a LNRS for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland and as such has a statutory duty to produce an LNRS. The consultation has informed the content of the LNRS.
6. The LNRS identifies nature priorities for the area and will support national environmental targets as well as the UK's international biodiversity commitment.
7. The LNRS will form part of the Council's Policy Framework and thus requires approval by Council.

Timetable for Decisions (including Scrutiny)

8. The Environment and Climate Change Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on 22 January 2025 and its comments are set out in paragraphs 39 to 41 of this report. The Committee will consider a further report on 11 June and its comments will be reported to the Cabinet.
9. The final LNRS is also going through the approval processes of the supporting authorities (the role of which is explained in paragraph 27 below) before it is submitted to Full Council on 2 July 2025. The period for raising formal objections has passed but as the LNRS is a collaborative effort, each supporting authority has the opportunity to approve it via their governance process and show their commitment. All supporting authorities have indicated that they will do this by 2 July.
10. Once approved by the Council and supporting authorities, the LNRS will be sent to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to approve its publication.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

11. The new statutory duty supports 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.
12. The strengthened biodiversity duty, also introduced under the Environment Act 2021, requires public bodies, including local authorities, to 'conserve and enhance biodiversity'.
13. Development of the LNRS will identify the nature priorities for the area, while the 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.

14. The Cabinet at its meeting on 17 December 2024 approved the draft LNRS for public consultation.

Resource Implications

15. Leicestershire County Council receives 'new burdens' funding for taking on the role of 'responsible authority' in the form of a Section 31 grant. The amount provided was calculated using a national formula, with the County Council receiving £337,741 over two years (2023-24 – 2024-25). This is in addition to almost £49,000 received over 2021-22 and 2022-23.
16. The funding provided has been used for developing the LNRS, including employing a project manager and specialist support and ensuring that full and proper engagement took place with partners, stakeholders and residents to develop the draft LNRS, and to carry out the public consultation.
17. The total expenditure in 2023-24 was £76,432 and in 2024-25 was £160,768. The remaining unspent funding of £145,018 has been carried forward into 2025-26, to support the delivery of the LNRS and implement the LNRS Delivery Plan (the content and monitoring of which will be the subject of further work). The efficient and prudent expenditure of the funding means that a significant amount can be spent on supporting the delivery of the LNRS.
18. Further new burdens funding is expected to be provided by the Government for 2025-26, to support the delivery of the LNRS. However, at this point no details have been provided on the amount or the conditions of any funding.
19. 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.
20. 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

21. This report will be circulated to all members.

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PART B

Background

22. As part of the Environment Act 2021, the Government introduced the requirement to develop LNRSs across England. There are 48 LNRS areas across England.
23. This new mandatory system of spatial strategies will map the most valuable existing areas for nature, establish priorities and set out proposals for specific actions to drive nature's recovery and provide wider environmental benefits, such as reduced flooding and overheating, and improvements to water and air quality.
24. 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 and Rutland. Over the next year, the Government put in place a national framework for the preparation of LNRSs. This included confirming the strategy boundaries and formally agreeing the roles of the responsible authority to lead in each area.
25. In March 2023 the official regulations and guidance pertaining to LNRS (the Environment (Local Nature Recovery Strategies) (Procedure) Regulations 2023) were released. These 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.
26. In May 2023 all provisional responsible authorities were notified by DEFRA that they had been appointed as the responsible authority for their respective LNRS area.

Development of the Draft LNRS

27. Responsible authorities and supporting authorities are defined in the Environment (Local Nature Recovery Strategies) (Procedure) Regulations 2023, in summary:
 - Responsible authorities - are required to work with stakeholders across the public, private, and voluntary sectors to agree priorities, map the most valuable existing areas for nature, and establish shared proposals for action.
 - Supporting authorities - work closely with the responsible authorities to help shape the local LNRS, provide local data, and review the draft strategies, and following agreement of the LNRS to inform the rollout of Biodiversity Net Gain, provide evidence to inform Local Plans, and consider the LNRS as part of their statutory duties.

28. Responsible authorities are required 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.
29. In addition, the County Council has involved other public bodies in the development of the LNRS, such as the Environment Agency, the Forestry Commission, and the National Forest Company.

Governance

30. A governance structure was established to support the development of the draft LNRS. It consisted of a Steering Group, comprising officers from the County Council (as the responsible authority), the supporting authorities, and the DEFRA bodies of the Environment Agency, Forestry Commission and the National Forest Company.
31. The Steering Group was supported by a Strategic Reference Group which provided cross-sectoral expert guidance, and a number of thematic working groups (covering areas such as communication and engagement, GIS mapping and modelling, species technical expertise) 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 and Rutland Wildlife Trust, and Trent Rivers Trust (a full list of the partners and stakeholders is referenced in Appendix A).

Communication and Engagement

32. A wide-ranging programme of communication and engagement was undertaken to promote development of the LNRS, and to encourage stakeholders and residents to get involved and share their expertise, knowledge and views. This has developed a LNRS that has been co-created by those with an interest in nature’s recovery and who will be affected by implementation of the new Strategy across Leicestershire, Leicester, and Rutland.
33. The engagement programme included an online 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 all to comment on where existing nature activity was happening, where there was an opportunity to do more, or where there were pressures on nature. Some 516 comments were placed on the map.
34. The engagement programme also included a series of farmer/landowner and resident workshops across the LNRS area. These allowed for the sharing of the results of the surveys and the interactive map, for the early consideration on the possible nature priorities and the measures to achieve these and to identify areas of agreement and consensus and areas that needed further work.

35. Specialist support was provided by a data analysis and mapping consultancy. This included the development of separate data layers and the use of modelling software to create opportunity maps, suggesting localities 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.
36. An analysis of almost 100 existing strategies and plans from across the area was undertaken to identify priorities and objectives which could contribute to the development of the LNRS or which the LNRS could support in delivering.
37. The above work resulted in a draft LNRS which was approved by the Cabinet for public consultation in December 2024.

Public Consultation

38. An eight-week public consultation exercise took place from 6 January to 28 February 2025. The draft LNRS, a summary version, and the associated Local Habitat Maps were all available for comment. Comments could also be added to an interactive map. In addition to the online consultation, a total of 24 in-person and online events were held across the area. This was all publicised via local newspapers and the usual social media channels.

Comments of the Environment and Climate Change Overview and Scrutiny Committee

39. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a report on the draft LNRS on 22 January 2025 as part of the public consultation process.
40. The Committee noted the Council's role as designated responsible authority for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland and was pleased with the approach taken to the development of the LNRS including the interactive mapping, which would encourage continued participation. It was suggested that hard copies of the Strategy could be deposited in local libraries.
41. The Committee noted that the LNRS had the potential to produce significant beneficial effects on the local environment and welcomed the new Strategy.

Consultation Feedback

42. A total of 386 completed surveys were received as well as 307 comments on the interactive map and six written submissions. Approximately 360 people engaged with the consultation through the in-person and online events.
43. Over 1,600 individual comments were made in relation to the draft LNRS document and supporting documents, in addition to the 307 comments in relation to the Local Habitat Maps.
44. Overall, the LNRS was very positively received, with 97% of respondents agreeing with its strategic aims. This likely reflected the effort to involve

partners, stakeholders and residents in the development of the draft LNRS and the thought put into the design, layout, style and tone of the document.

45. Most of the changes made to the draft LNRS and supporting documents arising from the feedback most related to improving the accuracy and clarity of the document, in summary:
 - a) The addition of two paragraphs, one on the Jurassic Limestone area (page 64), and one to highlight the need to consider species reintroduction projects in the future (page 79).
 - b) The addition of the measure codes in the LNRS document to make it easier to cross reference to those codes used in the Local Habitat Map (pages 68-77).
 - c) Rewording of nine paragraphs to make them clearer.
 - d) Clarification of two statistics.
 - e) One image change.
 - f) Re-wording of three of the geodiversity measures to be consistent with the style of the other measures (page 77).
 - g) The addition of one new measure in relation to Local Wildlife Sites, to the Green and Blue corridors priority as follows: 'Restore, enhance and manage Local Wildlife Sites to recognise their ecological value and strengthen their role as stepping stones across the wider ecological network' (page 76).
46. In addition, eight changes were made to the Local Habitat Maps, including the addition of a missing data layer and improving the clarity of certain boundary lines.

Content of the LNRS

47. The content of the LNRS is largely prescribed in the 2023 Regulations and guidance, with draft strategies required to meet certain criteria in order to be approved by Natural England for consultation. The LNRS consists of two key components: the LNRS strategy document, and the auxiliary webpages that include an interactive copy of the Local Habitat Map and the supporting information.
48. The important elements of the Strategy document are:
 - a) The 8 strategic aims of the Strategy (Section 4):
 - i. Increase the area and diversity of land and water managed for wildlife in Leicestershire, Leicester, and Rutland (make more space for nature).
 - ii. Increase biodiversity by improving the ecological condition.
 - iii. Reinstate natural processes, make space for water and utilise nature-based solutions to support nature and climate resilience.
 - iv. Protect and enhance green and blue spaces within urban habitats.
 - v. Promote sustainable agriculture and support local food systems.

- vi. Improve ecological connectivity by establishing coherent and resilient ecological networks at scale.
 - vii. Reduce major pressures and threats to nature including invasive non-native species.
 - viii. Improve understanding of the state of nature and actively monitor habitat/species change over time.
- b) The area description of the natural landscape and how people have shaped it;
 - c) An assessment of the state of nature across the area (including a presentation in map form of the existing areas of particular importance for biodiversity, to be published on the LNRS webpages);
 - d) The key environmental considerations, such as the future pressures and wider environmental issues (Section 8);
 - e) A presentation in map form of the areas that could become of importance for biodiversity and the wider environment (also to be published on the webpages);
 - f) Main biodiversity priorities and measures to take place within the priority areas as well as the landscape scale (area-wide) action;
 - g) Key factors needed to support the delivery of the LNRS;
 - h) Appendices with supporting information and technical detail.
49. The LNRS ultimately serves as a call to action for everyone to play a role in the recovery of nature, ensuring that the biodiversity and the 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.

Equality Implications

50. There are no equality implications arising from the content of this report.
51. 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 the 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

52. There are no human rights implications arising from the content of this report.

Environmental Implications

53. 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 reducing emissions, reducing the impacts of a changing climate, for instance through reduced flood risk, and improving water and air quality.

Risk Assessment

54. The project risk assessment has been updated. The key risks remaining after the existing control measures that have been taken are:
 - a) Insufficient funding to implement the LNRS.
 - b) Reputational damage to the Council as the responsible authority.
55. Thus far, funding has only been provided by the Government for the development of the LNRS, though it is expected that the underspend is sufficient to support the development of an initial delivery plan. An announcement on the future new burdens funding from the Government for the LNRS is awaited.
56. The 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, the Natural Flood Management projects and other investment, such as philanthropic donations, future grants from the Government or other grants. However, funding is needed to cover the costs of managing the implementation of the LNRS, supporting governance, and future reviews.
57. While it is considered that the Council's reputation has been enhanced by the professional and collaborative approach taken in developing the LNRS, there remains the risk of reputational damage for the Council in its role as the responsible authority, for instance were any of the supporting authorities or key stakeholders to raise any concerns about the final LNRS during the final approval phase or should difficulties arise in delivering the measures that are set out in the LNRS.
58. Both these risks will be mitigated by continued regular and professional communication and engagement with the DEFRA, the supporting authorities, other partners and stakeholders, and the collaborative and collective approach planned for the further development and delivery of the LNRS. A Responsible Authority Network (established by the DEFRA) brings those authorities together on a national and regional basis to provide support and give feedback to DEFRA, and will also be a means to lobby for sufficient funding and clarity as to 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)

Report to the Cabinet on 17 December 2024, Draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy:

<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/documents/s187228/FINAL%20Draft%20Local%20Nature%20Recovery%20Strategy%20Cabinet%20171224.pdf>

Environment (Local Nature Recovery Strategies) (Procedure) Regulations 2023:
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2023/341/made>

Reports to the Environment and Climate Change Overview and Scrutiny Committee
on 22 January 2025 and 11 June 2025

<https://cexmodgov01/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=1292&MId=7906>

<https://cexmodgov01/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=1292&MId=7908>

Appendices

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

Appendix B: LNRS Local Habitat Map (includes link to interactive map)

Appendix C: LNRS Equality Impact Assessment