Nature Recovery network guidance and criteria

Government have proposed that a Nature Recovery Network national partnership is established to involve a wide range of organisations in the development and implementation of a Nature Recovery Network project. Natural England, working with the Environment Agency and Forestry Commission, is well-placed to lead and co-ordinate this effort, working closely with a wide range of external partners to establish a national project and develop a strategic delivery plan. Defra want to work with partners to agree:

> ➢ Principles and objectives for the network;
> ➢ The structure of the Network, including the criteria for its key components;
> ➢ A framework for setting up and supporting local network partnerships;
> ➢ A toolkit of criteria, guidance, data and mapping for developing the network at local level;
> ➢ Metrics and reporting methods for monitoring the development of the network;
> ➢ A process for identifying landscape and catchment-scale nature recovery areas.

The framework for establishing local network partnerships will be particularly important for effective securing participation and support, and we want to gather the views of stakeholders on how this can best be achieved.

Defra suggest it would be preferable for local network partnerships to be based on existing arrangements where they are fit for purpose. There are many long-standing stakeholder partnerships for nature conservation and for landscape or environmental improvement, and a number of government partnership initiatives, such as Local Nature Partnerships and Catchment Partnerships. In addition, we need to consider the role and contribution of local planning authorities, which already have responsibilities in relation to ecological networks under the National Planning Policy Framework.

Through discussion with partners, Defra want to develop a better understanding of the arrangements that would be most effective – bearing in mind that these might look different in different places – and at what spatial scale they should operate. There can be a tension, for example, between the ideal ecological spatial scale and operational administrative boundaries, such as those of local planning authorities.

Criteria and guidance

National discussions with partners and enthusiasts have supported the development of criteria for identifying the components of the Network and guidance for applying these criteria locally to objective-setting and spatial prioritisation.

The criteria will need to be sufficiently broad to apply in a range of settings: upland and lowland, rural and urban. While ecological objectives will be central, the criteria would also need to reflect the over-arching objectives of the network, for example, by

incorporating consideration of ecosystem service provision, climate change adaptation and mitigation, and recreation and access.

Identification of potential habitat creation areas will inevitably require consideration of competing priorities for land-use in a given location and so decision-support tools will be needed for evaluating the optimal combination of objectives.

Developing mapping to support the development of the Network will be a complex challenge and we will need to work with partners on the appropriate data to use and how a mapping framework should be constructed.

Local partnerships will likely want to develop local network maps. Maps produced nationally and using predominantly national datasets, would benefit from addition of local data and intelligence about priorities and opportunities. This would also allow input by relevant local communities and landowners.

A key requirement is that the datasets for producing network maps should be readily-available, accessible and easy to use for partnerships, although a lead organisation may be identified to undertake technical mapping work.

Any network maps will need to be practical for a range of potential purposes, including:

> Generating new habitat and species projects;
> Prioritisation of environmental land management outcomes;
> Locating biodiversity net gain compensation; and
> Supporting planning functions as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework.

Collating available datasets and designing a mapping framework for local use will clearly be technically challenging and require a dedicated resource. Natural England is keen to explore the appetite for a national mapping working group to be established at an early stage to undertake this and to announce a mapping call-for-evidence. Any such group would need to link with what is going on in other initiatives such as catchment management or Environmental Land Management.

There is a wealth of data and mapping resources held by Government and partners that could be used to develop the network and some examples are listed below:

> **Habitat Networks Mapping** – Natural England maps identifying current priority habitat networks and indicating potential areas for extending and linking areas through habitat creation and restoration. Associated Climate Change Vulnerability Maps for habitats can inform consideration of network resilience and sustainability.
> **Favourable Conservation Status analysis** – Statements in development setting out the required minimum extent and spatial configuration for priority habitats and species at national and local levels.
> **Species 'Big Wins' analysis and habitat/population connectivity modelling** – Resources identifying, respectively, areas of landscape-scale habitat restoration that are optimal for supporting the recovery of groups of priority species, and

optimal migration routes for species across the landscape via suitable habitat networks.

➢ **Biodiversity priorities** – Habitat restoration and creation hotspots mapping by the Landscape Partnership (National Trust, RSPB, Wildlife Trusts and Woodland Trust). Also, Plantlife's Important Plant Areas and Important Freshwater Areas mapped by the Freshwater Habitats Trust.

➢ **Woodlands and water** – Forestry Commission mapping identifying opportunities for woodland creation, habitat networks and for afforestation to improve water quality and flood attenuation. The Environment Agency's land-use mapping indicating priority areas for changes in land management and use to deliver integrated environmental improvements, including for habitats, water quality, and flood risk management.