

**Report to:** Cabinet  
**Date of Meeting:** 30 September 2020  
**Public Document:** Yes  
**Exemption:** None  
**Review date for release** None



**Subject:** Nature Recovery Networks & Re-wilding projects

**Purpose of report:** This report promotes the wider coverage of nature recovery networks and re-wilding projects, building on the work undertaken already in some of our green spaces. It takes the form of a review document with a series of recommendations to form a policy on nature recovery networks and re-wilding activity. The report builds on the priorities and objectives set out in our Green Space Plan, and is consistent with our corporate outstanding environment theme.

The report looks at national guidance and considers definitions and existing projects. The initiative advances a commitment in the Climate Change Strategy and stated objectives in several Service Plans.

**Recommendation:** To progress our Climate Change Strategy and Service Plan commitments on nature recovery and re-wilding it is recommended that:

1. We extend our coverage of nature recovery networks and re-wilding projects, carefully defining our aspirations;
2. We work through the green spaces identified in our Green Space Plan and assess whether they are suitable for recovery/re-wilding;
3. We identify a suitable re-wilding site in every East Devon town as an exemplar within a year;
4. We identify areas of Housing land suitable for nature recovery and/or re-wilding and consult with tenants with proposals;
5. We map and record areas identified for recovery/re-wilding and monitor the benefits arising from the process;
6. We establish an improved understanding of the position of fauna and flora species in the district;
7. We establish a campaign to promote the benefits of re-wilding in a range of settings; and
8. We establish a project group, adopt the guiding principles, and specify what constitutes re-wilding and how this can be achieved in the district.

**Reason for recommendation:** To progress ambitions in the Climate Change Strategy, Green Space Plan, and Service Plans aimed at achieving improved biodiversity and natural habitats through re-wilding and implementing nature recovery corridors.

**Officer:** John Golding Strategic Lead – Housing, Health & Environment.

**Portfolio Holder:** Portfolio Holder Climate Action

**Financial implications:** There are no financial implications outlined in the report and it is assumed the recommendations are either cost neutral or will save on existing budgets

**Legal implications:** There are no specific legal implications arising from the report which require comment. Individual actions that may arise will be subject to further assessment and comment as appropriate.'

**Equalities impact:** Low Impact

**Climate change:** Medium Impact

**Risk:** This project delivers on one of our climate change actions  
Low Risk

The proposals are considered low risk.

**Links to background information:** [Nature Recovery Network Appendix 1](#)

**Link to [Council Plan](#):**

Outstanding Place and Environment  
Outstanding Homes and Communities  
Outstanding Economic Growth, Productivity, and Prosperity  
Outstanding Council and Council Services

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The concept of nature recovery networks or corridors is simply to allow natural growth to flourish and leaving nature to repopulate the unmanaged environment over time. In recent years the approach has gained traction in a number of areas, and is in part a reaction to over-managed green space, open space, and farm land that has reduced habitats and biodiversity.
- 1.2 A **Nature Recovery Network** is a vision for a joined-up natural world; where wild places across the country are connected to give nature room to thrive, on land and at sea. It allows plants, animals, seeds, nutrients and water to move from place to place and enables the natural world to adapt to change. It gives plants and animals more places to live, feed and breed. The attached brochure illustrates this as a concept (**annex 1**).
- 1.3 To recover, wildlife cannot be confined to nature reserves. We should create a Nature Recovery Network that extends into every part of our towns, villages 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 our skylines, planting more street trees to give people shady walks in the summer, encouraging whole communities to garden for wild plants and animals - it's time to stitch back together Britain's tattered natural fabric of wild land. In doing so, we will not only help nature recover, but enable even more people to experience our natural world.
- 1.4 Nature Recovery Networks sit comfortably with the idea of **Re-wilding** and allowing some of our more managed and manicured areas to 'go wild'. This can be achieved in small green spaces simply and cheaply.
- 1.5 It has become widely recognised that 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, fuel and food. It also provides us with outstanding 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.

- 1.6 Decades of development pressure, extraction, intensive agriculture and industrial production have contributed to a serious global decline in the healthy functioning of our natural environment, exacerbated by a changing climate.
- 1.7 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 with partners and communities on the landscape-scale to embed the Lawton principles (see more below) of Bigger, Better, More and Joined Up in our local, regional and national policies and strategies. This means protecting and enhancing our existing natural habitats, but also making them bigger, restoring and creating new areas of species-rich habitat, and, critically, ensuring they join up to create functional and resilient ecological networks that enable nature and people to thrive.
- 1.8 The concepts of nature recovery and re-wilding has been a **Council Plan** and **Service Plan** objective and we already have some good examples of putting this into practice on our nature reserves, parks & gardens, and other open spaces. We have also captured this as an action in the **Climate Change Action Plan**.
- 1.9 Our **Green Space Plan** (GSP) was our attempt a few years ago to recognise the value and extent of our green spaces, and set out our vision for using and managing our (Council owned) green spaces, and the ambitions we have looking forward for our green spaces in East Devon.
- 1.10 This GSP was purposely linked with the Council Plan priority – **Delivering and promoting our outstanding environment** – the plan has an action to adopt a GSP the purpose of which is to value and help protect our natural environment.
- 1.11 It is widely recognised that green space is a vital part of the public realm and that attractive, safe, accessible green space contributes towards positive social, economic and environmental benefits, improving public health and wellbeing and the quality of life. Green space and the environment make East Devon an **outstanding place**, and we have an amazing green space offer that contributes towards making the district such an attractive place to live, work and play.
- 1.12 If you look at the amount of green space that we own and/or manage and the different typologies you can see that the Council plays a key role locally in the provision of green space, including beaches. We manage approximately **1,565 hectares** of land including parks and gardens; nature reserves; housing land; allotments; play areas of various types; sports pitches; informal recreation areas; beaches and foreshores. We spend about £2.5 million per annum on managing green space in our ownership and achieve about £1.2 million in income bringing net expenditure down to **£1.3 million p.a.**
- 1.13 We have set out a series of aims in the GSP with a number of management policies under the headings of formal and informal green space; natural green space; beaches and foreshores; children's and young people's space.
- 1.14 At a high level we want the GSP to:
  - Define the value and role of green spaces;
  - Generate political and inter-service support of green space and clear lines of responsibility;
  - Develop a vision shared by politicians and all partners;

- Create a policy framework for the protection, enhancement, accessibility, and use of green space;
- Ensure that green spaces enhance the quality of life, diversity of environment and promote civic pride;
- Ensure that the network of green space meets the needs of local people;
- Provide a framework for resource allocation;
- Create a framework for voluntary and community groups to participate in green space provision and management.

1.15 We are already encouraging some exciting developments in park improvement, outdoor theatre, enhancing Seaton Wetlands, hire of our facilities, our events programme, pocket parks, community orchards, and we want to be able to continue to encourage these initiatives within the context of an overarching Plan.

1.16 Our Service Plans (Countryside & Leisure; Street Scene; Planning and Housing) contain specific actions and commitments relating to green space, together with performance measures so that we can monitor the progress of this Green Space Plan.

1.17 Our ambition, alongside managing and protecting existing green space, is to expand our green space offer where there is a sound business case for doing so.

<https://eastdevon.gov.uk/media/2318123/green-space-plan-2017-2027.pdf>

## 2. Defra discussion paper

2.1 In April 2019 Defra (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) published a discussion paper on Nature Recovery Networks, promoting the concept and setting out some principles.

2.2 The rationale for Nature Recovery Networks is set out in the UK Government's **25-Year Environment Plan**. Defra state that if we are to reverse past declines in wildlife populations and the extent and condition of their habitats, and if we are to secure wider economic and social benefits for people, we need not only to continue to conserve and improve our best wildlife sites, but also to expand our resource of wildlife-rich habitat outside the protected sites.

2.3 The rationale builds on the vision set out by **Sir John Lawton** in ***Making Space for Nature*** - Wildlife recovery requires more, bigger, better and more joined-up habitats. A step-change is required in the approach of nature conservation to one of large-scale habitat restoration and creation, underpinned by the re-establishment of ecological processes and ecosystem services.

2.4 Defra recognise that the challenge is to secure a natural environment where the biodiversity, functioning and resilience of ecosystems are re-established in an expanding network of spaces for nature that are sustainable into the future.

2.5 The over-arching commitment in the 25-Year Environment Plan to achieve "a growing and resilient network of land, water and sea that is richer in plants and wildlife", together with the ambitions for a Nature Recovery Network and an additional 500,000 ha of wildlife-rich habitat, represents a significant shift in the ambition of Government to secure the necessary step-change in conservation.

2.6 The restoration of habitats also helps to improve and safeguard **Natural Capital** assets and the flow of ecosystem services that they provide, such as water regulation, flood risk management, carbon capture and pollination.

2.7 Defra believe that the **Nature Recovery Network**, including identification of potential areas for restoration and creation, can act as a strategic spatial prioritisation framework for integrated planning and delivery of environmental objectives – an ambition identified by the Natural Capital Committee and incorporated within the 25-Year Environment Plan.

- 2.8 As it creates more accessible green spaces, rich in wildlife, the Network can also bring multiple health, recreation and economic benefits for people and their communities.
- 2.9 With this significant potential for delivering multiple benefits for nature, people and the wider environment in mind, Defra suggest that the development of the Nature Recovery Network could helpfully be underpinned by a set of **key principles**:

- 1) **Integrated environmental delivery** – The Network’s primary aim is helping to recover nature, but it could provide a strategic spatial prioritisation framework to assist integrated delivery of a range of environmental outcomes where these can benefit from changes in land use or management. The Network should also link with and complement existing strategies.
- 2) **For nature and people** – In addition to natural environment objectives, the Network should also deliver socio-economic benefits, contributing to people’s health, well-being, recreation and economic prosperity, and helping to secure greater environmental equity across communities. It therefore needs to be both an urban and a rural network.
- 3) **A shared endeavour** – The success of the Network will depend on the degree to which we work with partners in a spirit of shared endeavour. For the Network to be widely supported and recognised as the primary framework for planning and delivering nature recovery, it will need to be developed in partnership from the outset.
- 4) **Built locally** – Local land managers, communities and organisations are best-placed to understand local priorities for nature recovery and for identifying opportunities to improve and extend the Network. The Network will need to be developed with local partnerships from the ‘bottom-up’ with the active participation of a range of stakeholders. We will support this ‘Ecosystem Approach’ to building the network in partnership, helping to convene local partnerships and providing strategic guidance, data and mapping. The Network should represent a strategic framework that is locally owned, and linked with local partnerships.
- 5) **Sustainable long-term** – To be sustainable in the face of climate change and other impacts, and to make a sustained contribution to nature recovery and climate change mitigation and adaptation, the integrity of the network needs to be maintained over time. The different components of the network will be variously safeguarded, for example, by legal protections or by planning policy. It will need to respond to a range of pressures and change and adapt.

### 3. Building a Network in partnership

- 3.1 Good practice suggests that the Nature Recovery Network at all its levels will need to be developed, planned, mapped and implemented in partnership. There needs to be a broad consensus that working in partnership from the outset will help establish networks that are relevant, valued and supported. The Network will need to help deliver national-level, strategic outcomes for nature recovery, but it is recognised that the effort to achieve this can only be planned and mobilised at local level.
- 3.2 This suggests that it will be essential to establish a framework for national and local network partnerships and to provide an appropriate toolkit of criteria, guidance, data and mapping to support local network development.
- 3.3 An extract of the advice on building networks and associated guidance is shown in **annex 2**.
- 3.4 To support this work it would be beneficial to have better intelligence of the fauna and flora across the district. This work would be complementary and influence the progress of re-wilding. Working with knowledgeable partners, volunteers, and community groups will help

us to build up a picture of the strength and viability of species and what has been lost from local habitats.

#### 4. Practical application of re-wilding on EDDC and other land to establish a network

- 4.1 The foregoing covers some of the national debate and direction on nature recovery and re-wilding, but we are interested in the practical application locally and how we develop the concept. We have delivered re-wilding on a number of our sites in recent years. This has occurred in parks and gardens, on nature reserves and areas of grassland and open space that we maintain.
- 4.2 Re-wilding for our purposes needs to be clearly defined. It is not defined in our Green Space Plan and this is one of the recommendations for future project work, but a working definition would be useful as the term is bandied around so often with little understanding of what it actually means. We have started to define it on our website as 'ecological rewilding' (places an emphasis on insect habitat restoration). This needs to be debated, developed and confirmed.
- 4.3 We already have some fine examples of re-wilding from what Wild East Devon and StreetScene has achieved. These can be used for local case studies. For instance, the long grass areas in Exmouth that have been created in Phear Park, Brixington Park and St Johns Road playing field with a total 37,000m<sup>2</sup> of land, and the wildflower areas established in the Byes, Sidmouth.
- 4.4 The official and nature conservation industry accepted definition of re-wilding is a form of environmental conservation and ecological restoration that has significant potential to increase biodiversity, create self-sustainable environments and mitigate climate change. **Re-wilding aims to do this by reintroducing lost animal species to natural environments.** It is an exciting and promising conservation strategy aimed at restoring natural processes and wilderness areas, providing connectivity between such areas (corridors), and reintroducing large herbivores, predators and/or keystone species.
- 4.5 Nationally the scale can range from The Knepp estate, West Sussex, where landscape scale extensive grazing and reintroducing missing keystone species, to leaving a small patch of long grass under a parkland tree. Wild East Devon key plans for adding biodiversity may not be classed as re-wilding but more improved and sensitive management. Appropriate gains can be found around creating new orchards, urban tree planting, wildflower meadow creation and sensitive verge management. Harder to achieve gains are in landscape scale and catchment management involving private land ownership and evolution of agricultural practices. We should start with our own land holdings, set a good example, then move on to supporting the wider population (**a nature reserve of gardens!**) and larger landowners.
- 4.6 An example of where we are trying to rewild is the reintroduction of the water vole within our sites by creating the right habitat and conditions to bring back a keystone species that was once wild within our riparian habitats...this also applies to the reintroduction of the beaver. I think we should therefore avoid giving management regimes such as creating wildflower corridors through reduced grass-cutting the term "rewilding" as in nature conservation terms we are not rewilding our estate but improving, recreating and enhancing green spaces for wildlife. This is a very important distinction to make and something we need to take seriously if we are going to make some serious decisions about how we look to manage our green spaces for greater biodiversity going forward.
- 4.7 Maybe we should refer to the work being done in our green spaces as **"recreating" wildflower habitats** rather than "rewilding" in our corporate documents, Service Plans and associated PR, it may seem like semantics, but to the wider nature conservation world it is an important distinction.

- 4.8 Before adopting an approach and promoting this more widely there is a note of caution that suggests that not all areas are suitable for rewilding. In some areas we may experience a proliferation of litter, dog mess, and create vision barriers on road verges. So we need to be sensitive to the different uses, areas and needs of all our spaces. Re-wilding will not be appropriate at every space and there will always remain a need to keep some areas cut tight with short grass giving a more manicured appearance. Our teams will always try to allow space for nature, but balance this with some spaces cut tighter for picnicking and ball games. Some additional and notable challenges to re-wilding will come from neighbours, existing user groups, underground services, equipment resources, green waste solutions and health and safety considerations.
- 4.9 Differing land uses will also necessitate flexible approaches, for instance in areas prone to litter or fly tipping, with narrow access or rear service lanes/highly urban areas with small green spaces; re-wilding may not be the appropriate management response for the area.
- 4.10 Furthermore, our Planners have advised a word of caution from a planning perspective in that the Local Plan sets standards for different types of open space based on the open space audit that we undertook some years ago. We need to ensure that the audit informs any rewilding work to ensure that we retain the appropriate standards of each category of open space in the towns.
- 4.11 For example, Planning colleagues question whether we should be rewilding areas of parks and recreation grounds unless we can demonstrate that there are excess parks and recreation grounds in that town when measured against our own adopted standards. Otherwise we could lead to a deficit of a particular type of open space in that area, which would have knock on impacts in terms of infrastructure needs and costs in the future in making up any shortfalls particularly if further development were to be promoted through the Local Plan, which further impact on the deficit. Some of our towns are already deficient in some types of formal open space and so if we start rewilding formal open space areas in these towns we would be achieving one objective to the detriment of another.
- 4.12 Our Countryside & Leisure Service branding uses a **Wild East Devon** tag and the team have been active in providing the **Wild Exmouth** project.  
<https://eastdevon.gov.uk/countryside/wild-exmouth/>
- 4.13 The **Wild Honiton** project proposal has been created working with a wide range of partners including Honiton Town Council that will focus on improving our wildlife corridors, improving wildlife habitat and ecology, enhancing the visitor experience to the town's green spaces, creating a sculpture trail to interpret the landscape, create a volunteer group to help manage our green spaces, create new physical access into our two AONBs and develop an outdoor learning and public events programme that celebrates and raises awareness of Honiton's wild spaces.
- 4.14 Wild East Devon has shown that with external funding the team can lead on such projects as Wild Exmouth, and we will be shortly starting to consult on the Wild Honiton project. We would like to scale up these in the future to include towns such as Axminster, Sidmouth, Seaton, Ottery and Cranbrook to develop and deliver biodiversity gains and benefits for health and wellbeing through public engagement. With our partnership approach Wild East Devon has attracted over £80,000 to the Wild Exmouth project and this would need to be repeated in each area if the initiative is scaled up.

### **Housing (HRA) land**

- 4.15 We have a significant amount of Housing land on our estates, which provides a nice environment and green spaces for tenants, reducing the density of our estates and creating areas for play and enjoyment. There is potential to make these sites more interesting from a

landscaping and nature perspective. Housing have a comprehensive and plotted database of green/open space, which was undertaken a few years ago. I suggest we should review this database with the purpose of identifying areas suitable for re-wilding.

- 4.16 StreetScene maintain our Housing land and tenants gardens (Garden Maintenance Scheme) where our tenant are unable to manage gardens themselves. We can collaborate on a scheme to promote re-wilding of these areas and our communal areas.
- 4.17 We have undertaken several **community orchard** projects on Housing land involving tenants and I suggest that we need to consult our tenants on rolling out the project on our estates and communal land. Our programme should explain to tenants the benefits of re-wilding and ask tenants to support the approach on communal areas and in their own gardens.

#### **Other ways of progressing the re-wilding/wild flower habitat concept**

- 4.18 There are opportunities for **community engagement** and securing public support for the project. There are also opportunities for **volunteering**, building on our existing volunteer base working mainly on nature reserves. It is clear implementing this project will be best if we work with community groups, Town & Parish Councils and landowners to secure their understanding, support and active involvement in the scheme.
- 4.19 We also need to be working with partners, landowners there are many groups who share our ambitions and we should be working with the Devon Wildlife Trust, Clinton Devon, AONB managers, Jurassic Coast Trust, Allotments, farmers to name just a few. Collectively there is a large and influential group of partners here that could make a transformational difference to the project. There are opportunities in people's **private gardens** and how they form part of the overall wildlife matrix.
- 4.20 There is huge potential in engaging with our **Areas of Outstanding Beauty** teams as much of their work overlaps with this agenda and who have considerable experience in sympathetically managing and maintaining the huge expanse of AONB that covers much of East Devon.
- 4.21 We are involved in an exciting multi-agency partnership project called the **Axe Catchment Restoration** project that links directly with our re-wilding ambitions, and an outline of the project is shown in **annex 3**.
- 4.22 We should operate a properly orchestrated **campaign** and actively promote re-wilding, encouraging gardeners and people with small green spaces to participate in re-wilding recognising the value that all natural spaces can contribute towards the diversification goal. There are some nice examples of community projects already well established. Woodbury Wide Awake project for example:

<https://www.woodbury-wide-awake.co.uk/>

- 4.23 We would like to explore the potential for **nature recovery at sea** and on our beaches and ensure that our ambitions include these areas and our thinking incorporated in our Beach Management Plans. This might include incorporating aspects of the Lyme Bay Fisheries and Conservation Reserve project in our thinking.

<https://lymebayreserve.co.uk/about/overview.php>

- 4.24 We have in-house expertise and can use the support and input of Tree team. With ongoing support for tree planting and natural regeneration as a contribution to climate action, the Tree Officers would have a wealth of knowledge to support planting the right tree in the right

place. We should also show a desire to source local and native species of flora for re-wilding projects. Also to research the species required to future proof against climate change, for example, what species will we plant today to replace those that will be lost to temperatures increase, such as beech.

- 4.25 During August we received notification of a new publication from **The Wildlife Trusts** title **Reversing the Decline of Insects (annex 4)**. This sits well with our re-wilding and biodiversity ambitions, providing evidence of the troubling decline in insects, some of the causes, and case studies of where and how recovery and recolonisation can be achieved. There are two references to projects in East Devon and a strong narrative for creating habitats that support insect life.
- 4.26 Perhaps the best way of rolling out this project is to establish a **project group** of members and officers (namely relevant Portfolio Holder / Assistant Portfolio Holders and officers), to review the existing re-wild areas and nature recovery projects; review the plotting and monitoring of existing areas; a desktop review to identify potential new areas to re-wild; site visits; organise community consultation; produce a generic specification/vision that be amended for site specific projects; have a planting standard; identify the potential for species reintroduction; devise monitoring arrangements. There is a lot of mapping work to do. We are working on mapping out our re-wilding areas already along with our greenspace interventions.
- 4.27 This initiative represents a significant commitment and will require considerable time and energy to realise the full benefits of a coordinated increase in natural green space. The project can be rolled out over time as we add to our portfolio of natural wild areas. This report can form the basis of our strategy and plan for nature recovery and re-wilding. The link between nature recovery and connecting with nature is so important. We can make huge gains for people and wildlife through this emerging project.