**NATURE IMPROVEMENT AREAS in Warwickshire Coventry and Solihull**

**A proposal to Local Nature Partnership Board March 2016**

**1. Introduction**

The Lawton review for Defra of England’s wildlife sites and ecological network[[1]](#footnote-1) recommended the establishment of ecological restoration zones, to enhance existing wildlife sites by making them part of a connected and expanded national ecological network. It is now widely recognised that an holistic approach is required to nature conservation, with restoration, creation and re connection of the many fragmented local sites being critical to success. Future conservation needs to be considered at a landscape scale, and collaboratively in the context of other land use issues.

The Lawton review informed the Government’s Natural Environment White Paper[[2]](#footnote-2) which promoted the restoration zone theme and established a competition across England for funding and formal recognition for Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs). Nearly 200 partnerships bid for the 12 Defra-funded pilot NIA projects. Warwickshire Coventry and Solihull LBAP partnership submitted an application to Defra to secure one of the 12 pilot projects, and was shortlisted to the last twenty bids and was successful in securing partial funding, which developed landscape scale partnerships.

Since the successful implementation of projects across the originally proposed NIA area in the sub region, and the development of significant investment funding into two landscape areas, the potential for locally determined NIAs has been realised. The existing landscape partnerships would be prime candidates for such a designation. The LNP Board discussed an initial paper in October 2015 and charged the LNP Implementation Group with progressing the process. A sub group met in March 2016 to develop the approach.

**LNP Statement re NIAs:**

The LNP supports the principle of the establishment of appropriate NIAs, in recognition of their contribution to the delivery of the aims of the Natural Environment White Paper and Biodiversity 2020. NIAs can be a useful mechanism for focusing and coordinating partnership efforts to where they can be most effective.

The LNP does not recognise NIAs as being an additional development constraint and would not support NIAs being used to designate land to prevent development and economic growth. The LNP recognises that sustainable economic growth is an important part of a shared vision and that new developments could contribute positively to biodiversity enhancement. A role of NIA partnerships is to provide the local context on the particular biodiversity enhancements most appropriate to deliver the NIAs objectives.

**2. What are Nature Improvement Areas?**

Defra defines NIAs as follows: *“Nature Improvement Areas are large (in the region of 10,000-50,000 hectares), discrete areas that, by taking a landscape–scale approach, will deliver a step change in nature conservation, where a local partnership has a shared vision for their natural environment. The partnership will plan and deliver significant improvements for wildlife and people through the sustainable use of natural resources, restoring and creating wildlife habitats, connecting local sites and joining up local action. The partnership will be able to demonstrate measurable improvements – the “step-change” - and commit to sharing information about their achievements[[3]](#footnote-3)”*

**3. The LNP Connection**

The Natural Environment White Paper proposed the establishment of Local Nature Partnerships to broaden the conservation agenda and make it relevant to other sectors, notably business and health. The LNP in Warwickshire Coventry and Solihull has brought together sectors which have previously never engaged with each other to work in true partnership to address priority ecological issues.

Defra has suggested possible roles for LNPs, one of which was the power formally to recognise locally determined NIAs. Defra’s guidance to LNPs was as follows:

“*In the Natural Environment White Paper, we set out our vision for Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) to be created wherever the opportunities or benefits are greatest, driven by the knowledge and vision of local partners. These landscape-scale initiatives aim to ensure that land is used sustainably to achieve multiple benefits for people, wildlife and the local economy. It is not the intention of NIAs to stifle sustainable development within the area; economic development within an NIA will remain vital, and many development proposals will have no or minimal impacts on the overall integrity or objectives of the NIA. We have set out a role for Local Nature Partnerships to work with and support the 12 Government-funded NIAs as well as to help establish new, locally determined NIAs. It is for Local Planning Authorities to decide whether and how to recognise an NIA in their local plans”.*

**4. National Planning Policy Framework**

The NPPF gives fairly clear guidance regarding NIAs:

*“117. To minimise impacts on biodiversity and geodiversity, planning authorities should:*

* *Plan for biodiversity at a landscape scale across local authority boundaries;*
* *Identify and map components of the local ecological networks, including the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites of importance for biodiversity, wildlife corridors and stepping stones that connect them and areas identified by local partnerships for habitat restoration or creation;*
* *Promote the preservation, restoration and re-creation of priority habitats, ecological networks and the protection and recovery of priority species populations, linked to national and local targets, and identify suitable indicators for monitoring biodiversity in the plan*
* *Aim to prevent harm to geological conservation interests; and*
* *Where Nature Improvement Areas are identified in Local Plans, consider specifying the types of development that may be appropriate in these areas.”*

 *157. Crucially, Local Plans should:*

* contain a clear strategy for enhancing the natural, built and historic environment, and supporting Nature Improvement Areas where they have been identified.

**5. Identifying potential NIAs in Warwickshire Coventry and Solihull**

There are a number of elements available to inform the identification of potential NIAs. Ecological mapping and opportunity mapping has been undertaken, identifying landscape scale areas to target.

Landscape scale priorities have been endorsed by the LNP Board in 2014.

The LBAP has been refreshed with revised targets (completed 2015), including targeting landscape scale areas for habitat restoration and creation. The Habitat Biodiversity Audit (HBA) continues to update the phase 1 habitat mapping, and the Local Wildlife Site project is surveying and designating further LWS sites.

Connectivity mapping has been undertaken by HBA team and Warwickshire County Council in conjunction with the University of York, showing levels of habitat connectivity across the sub region.

A further model, ‘Condatis’, has been run to identify particular connectivity ‘pinch points’ and to give flow maps, refining the connectivity mapping.

All of this information should be used in developing proposals for NIAs.

**6. Existing Landscape Scale Partnerships**

The existing landscape scale partnerships in the sub region have developed to address ecological issues in a particular geographic area or were existing partnerships which have developed their own landscape scale initiatives.

1. Tame Valley Wetlands Landscape Partnership was formed in 2005 to restore wetlands in the floodplain of the Tame Valley. This landscape scale scheme has achieved many successes, creating wetland sites along the river Tame system. It is led by Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, with key partners securing significant income to develop the vision.
2. Princethorpe Woodlands Living Landscape Partnership was formed in 2004 to restore and reconnect woodlands and other habitats across the area. It is led by Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, who secured project funding to develop survey data and demonstration projects. Major funding bids are in development (2016).
3. West Arden Landscape Partnership was started in 2013 to set overall aims, develop contacts and to implement initial projects. A vision and objectives have been written. The potential for linking this with River Blythe is being developed (March 2016).
4. Anker Valley Partnership was initiated in 2013 following interest from a local landowner. An initial vision and mapping have been undertaken.
5. Catchment Partnerships: Tame Anker Mease partnership was formed in 2011, and Warwickshire Avon in 2013. Catchment plans are in place for River Leam and for Tame Catchment, and the plan for Warwickshire Avon has been drafted.

**7. The basis for NIA designation**

The Living Landscapes area map (2009) and the LBAP Opportunity Map (2011) were developed to identify landscape scale areas. Based on robust data of the HBA, the LBAP Opportunity Map depicts those areas of the county which contain important clusters of key habitats (core areas). See Figure 1 below. The aim is to target conservation action to restore degraded habitats and reconnect fragmented sites to form truly viable tracts of wildlife rich landscape, including areas of high biodiversity value.

HBA and LBAP mapping has been the basis of all the established projects and is also informing the project areas of those in development. This use of data and informed knowledge provides a sound ecological rationale for the NIA proposals, demonstrates a consistency of approach over time and credible alignment with NIA principles.

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| **Table 2. National criteria set by Defra in order to identify locally-determined Nature Improvement Areas** |
| A shared vision for the natural environment exists among a wide partnership of local people, including statutory and voluntary sectors |
| Significant improvements to the ecological network can be achieved over large areas by enlarging and enhancing existing wildlife sites, improving ecological connectivity and/or creating new sites |
| Benefits to urban areas and communities can be achieved and, where appropriate, NIAs may contain urban areas as part of an enhanced ecological network |
| The surrounding land can be better integrated with valued landscapes and action to restore wildlife habitats and underpinning natural processes, helping to adapt to climate change impacts |
| “Win-win” opportunities are identified and have the potential to be exploited to the full to derive multiple benefits, for example with benefits for the water environment and Water Framework Directive objectives, flood and coastal erosion risk management and the low-carbon economy |
| There are opportunities to inspire people through an enhanced experience of the outside world |
| NIAs should contain all these components of an ecological network:* Core areas, especially existing wildlife sites (National Nature Reserves, Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Local Nature Reserves, Local Wildlife Sites, and other semi-natural areas of high ecological quality
* Corridors and stepping stones
* Restoration areas where priority habitats are created to provide (in time) more core areas
* Buffer zones, that reduce pressure on core areas
* Surrounding land that is sustainably managed, including for food production, in a wildlife friendly way
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**Figure 1.** **LBAP Opportunity Map** – produced by the sub regional Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership in 2011 – was based on data of the Habitat Biodiversity Audit partnership team of Phase 1 and Local Wildlife Sites project, and on the National Character Areas identified by Natural England. In addition to using core areas of high biodiversity value, the LBAP Habitats Opportunity map includes areas of good potential for restoration and for creating climate change adaptation corridors, fulfilling the Lawton principles. Partnership project areas which are based on the map are more than likely to meet the criteria for locally determined NIAs.

**8. What will NIA designation mean for those areas selected?**

Nature Improvement Areas are not a formal “protection” designation and do not impose any constraint on the landowners or managers within their boundaries with respect to land use, agricultural enterprise or economic initiative. NIAs include areas of high biodiversity value, where action to link and enhance existing wildlife sites will deliver high conservation benefit. There is no compulsion for any landowner within an NIA to become engaged in any conservation project.

NIAs may be recognised by local authorities in their local plans (although there is no compulsion for Local Authorities to do this). It is proposed that Local NIAs are recognised within the existing sub regional Green Infrastructure policy, as an appendix to the existing policy, alongside the Biodiversity Offsetting appendix.

NIAs may be targeted as receptor sites for Biodiversity Offsetting. This initiative is being implemented in Warwickshire, following work as a pilot study initiated by the Natural Environment White Paper. Biodiversity Offsetting is a last resort which involves compensation for that element of a built development where there is a **residual impact on biodiversity which cannot be avoided of mitigated for on or immediately adjacent to a site**. In such circumstances, a developer may purchase “credits” to compensate for impact on biodiversity, to fund conservation activity elsewhere. Implementation of Biodiversity Offsetting on the ground is in early stages however a positive outcome could be targeted delivery in a single focussed area (an NIA). Under such a scheme landowners within an NIA could register and receive payment for allowing compensatory measures to take place on their land.

NIAs are noted as a consideration in the application of agri-environment schemes, which may assist landowners to gain resources. Organisations or partnerships applying for conservation grant funding (i.e. HLF and Landfill credit funding) are more likely to be successful if their projects contribute to the objectives of an NIA, as they can demonstrate a direct link to the Natural Environment White paper, Lawton principles and Biodiversity 2020, delivering biodiversity outputs.

Defra has produced a report[[4]](#footnote-4) which has monitored and evaluated the 12 Government funded NIAs.

**9. The national context**

There is no set national procedure for designating locally determined NIAs, as Defra has recognised the role of LNPs to undertake this process. However this proposal includes all the national criteria for NIAs and so is consistent with the national approach.

Defra has been consulted on a similar process established by Gloucestershire LNP in 2014.

**10. The Approval process**

It is recommended that the following process is used for designation of Local NIAs in Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull.

The attached form has been developed for partnerships of proposed NIAs to outline how their proposal will be enhancing and reconnecting nature, contributing to the establishment of healthy ecological networks across the sub region. The information provided will be used by the LNP to assess whether the proposal meets the national aims and objectives for NIAs. The LNP will assess NIA proposals, will consult with relevant partners via the LNP Implementation Group, of which all local authorities are members, and will be responsible for formally recognising the Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull components of appropriate NIAs.

**11. Recommendations**

1. **The Local Nature Partnership is asked to approve this paper and the process by which locally-determined NIAs will be approved for the sub region.**

The proposal is in line with Defra guidelines.

Formalising the designation of Local NIAs will link the LNP’s strategic and advocacy role with delivery in the long term of a cohesive and resilient ecological network, fulfilling part of the vision for the LNP. This proposed process is aligned to our original application to Defra.

Recognising locally-determined NIAs and consolidating the relationship with the various landscape scale partnerships, will bring us closer to achieving and implementing the vision for LNP.

2. **The LNP will work with Warwickshire County Council to progress inclusion of this process in the sub regional Green Infrastructure Strategy.**

**3. Proposals for Tame Valley Wetlands Landscape NIA and for Princethorpe Woodlands Living Landscape NIA should be submitted to LNP Implementation Group for assessment during 2016, and brought to LNP Board once finalised.**

**The form to be completed for a proposed NIA accompanies this paper.**

**Credits:**

This paper and form has been developed from other LNP papers re designation of locally determined NIAs: thanks to West of England, Gloucestershire, and Hertfordshire LNPs, and to members of the WCS LNP Implementation NIA sub Group.

Gina Rowe, LNP Secretariat and Chair of LNP Implementation Group

1. Lawton, J. September 2010. Making Space for Nature: A review of England’s Wildlife Sites and Ecological Network. Defra [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Defra. June 2011. The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Defra. September 2012. Criteria for Local Authorities, Local Nature Partnerships and others to apply when identifying Nature Improvement Areas [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5542385517854720 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)