

Gloucestershire **Local** Nature *Partnership*

Report on work undertaken by the Gloucestershire Nature Partnership to support delivery of Gloucestershire's Strategic Economic Plan

1. Introduction

Local Nature Partnerships were introduced by the Government as a key commitment in the 2011 Natural Environment White Paper with the intention that local areas would work in a joined up and strategic way to help manage the natural environment to produce multiple benefits for people, the economy and the environment.

The Gloucestershire LNP was established with the specific aim of delivering ecological enhancement in a more strategic way and in conjunction with an expanded group of partners and stakeholders. The LNP's vision is of a sustainable Gloucestershire where the importance and relevance of the natural environment is acknowledged and respected. Rather than always being seen as a constraint, the LNP recognises that the opportunities the natural environment presents to contribute to sustainable development and human health and well-being can be a driver for positive change. It has already demonstrated its willingness to work with the development and business sector for better outcomes all round and the close working relationship we have established with the LEP is recognised within Defra as the model of how LNPs should operate. This was reinforced when Defra officials visited Gloucestershire in December 2015 and attended a meeting jointly convened by the LNP and the LEP.

The LEP too has shown its commitment to economic and environmental sustainability, not least by its participation in the LEED (Local Environment and Economic Development) process in 2014, which was promoted by Natural England and designed to bring together the economic and environmental agendas in a collaborative and synergistic way. The working relationship between the LNP and the LEP is recognised as best practice nationally.

2. The proposal

In March 2015 the LNP proposed to undertake an environmental oversight role in relation to the Strategic Economic Plan and identify its potential environmental impacts, both direct and indirect. It was recognised that the statutory processes which such an ambitious plan brings into play would still operate, but the LNP's aim was to bring together at the earliest opportunity all parties and agencies – statutory and non-statutory – to consider the environmental issues and opportunities associated with the SEP's major projects and take a solutions-based approach to addressing such issues and maximising opportunities.

The original proposal aimed to include a number of key elements:

- Bring LNP partners together in workshops and individual meetings to consider impacts, identify opportunities and agree overarching principles
- Identify success measures and establish a monitoring framework
- Present a proposal to the County Council and LEP, determine integration structure and process, and establish an advisory group
- Agree protocol with local planning authorities on pre-application advice and EIA scoping
- Seek political buy-in
- Produce a prospectus of what we aim to achieve along with advisory notes and guidance

3. Natural capital 'Game changer' projects

Natural Capital can be defined as the world's stocks of natural assets which include geology, soil, air, water and all living things. It is from this Natural Capital that humans derive a wide range of services, often called ecosystem services, which make human life possible.

Natural capital is exploited globally to meet human need and can be managed sustainably, but unless investment is made to maintain our stock of natural capital it can become degraded. Framing the natural environment in these terms helps people understand that we cannot go on exploiting our natural resources indefinitely without putting something back.

The overriding purpose of the LNP is to ensure that our stock of natural capital is in good health so that it can continue to provide the services we could not do without.

Working with the LEP and responding to a fast changing situation and uncertainties over the past year, the LNP decided to focus its efforts on 'Game Changing' projects where it could make a real difference to SEP outcomes in terms of enhancing natural capital. The first part of this report therefore summarises those areas which the LNP has given high priority to and delivered on over the past year.

GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE Game Changer #1

The evidence that well planned and accessible open green space in new built development is more attractive to buyers providing them with health & well-being benefits is firmly established. The Joint Core Strategy has identified the housing need for the county and LNP partners were actively involved in scrutinising and guiding the allocations. Our early involvement in the JCS meant that many of the potential ecological constraints were avoided or minimised at the outset and as a result the final allocations now present little in the way of future ecological conflict.

Consequently, the allocated development sites therefore present an unrivalled opportunity for significant ecological enhancement through well planned and multi-functional Green Infrastructure. The LNP's vision is that wildlife places in the wider countryside can link seamlessly with new urban and suburban green space presenting significant benefits both for wildlife and people.

The LNP has been developing this area of work in two ways. Firstly, Green Infrastructure is now the focus area of activity for ESIF funding. A considerable amount of work has been carried out by the LNP and its constituent partners over the past year identifying project sites and match funding for retro-fitting high quality Green Infrastructure in the JCS area. This has been in anticipation of a call for GI projects which at the time of writing (July 2016) is imminent.

The second initiative is the development of a Green Infrastructure benchmark which is being developed by GWT and the University of the West of England (UWE) supported by an expert panel. We are currently working with a number of developers and two local authorities (Tewkesbury and Stroud) on trialling the benchmark which aims to encourage high quality, multi-functional Green Infrastructure in new built development. The benchmark will make properties more desirable and will raise the quality and standard of open green space in developments by promoting and elevating best practice. It is anticipated that the benchmark will launch in spring 2017 and will be the catalyst for exemplar Green Infrastructure in all future built development in Gloucestershire.

NATURAL APPROACHES TO WATER MANAGEMENT Game Changer #2

Gloucestershire LNP partners are leading the way in the deployment of natural solutions to major issues facing the county. This means working with nature and using natural processes rather than relying on traditional engineering options. The development of the Rural Sustainable Drainage (SuDS) project in the Stroud Valleys, led by Stroud District Council, is being hailed as a break-through in flood risk management. To date flood defence has involved dealing with the consequences of a natural environment which has lost the capacity to retain water. Decades of soil cultivation in the catchment above Stroud along with the straightening and deepening of watercourses has not only meant that soil structures have been degraded and lost their water-holding capacity, but the water and soil which runs off the land has a far quicker passage downstream resulting in sometimes catastrophic flash flooding events causing damage to homes and businesses. And often the first and last line of defence is a flood structure on the doorstep of assets most at risk.

The Rural SuDS project involves low cost schemes to slow down water transit in the headwaters above Stroud. The installation of hundreds of “leaky dams” – derived from trees felled on site – is beginning to restore the natural diversity of watercourses and is attenuating peak flood flow at the same time. Initial results have been very encouraging with no flooding of property in Slad being reported following a rain event in March 2016 although a similar event in 2009 resulted in major flooding there. Many of the dams have been installed on land owned by GWT and the National Trust, as well as private landowners, and the consequence of this activity is that the biodiversity of the watercourses is also benefitting.

It is anticipated that the roll-out of Rural SuDS across Gloucestershire will make a significant positive contribution to flood risk in the county, protecting homes and businesses and eliminating disruption and the high cost of repairs.

Further game changers in planning

As a result of recent workshops new strands are being developed by partners. In the Cotswolds, catchment scale management – an initiative between Thames Water and Gloucestershire FWAG - is delivering multiple benefits; helping to build soil health, expand populations of pollinators by the provision of flower-rich grass leys which then provide the raw materials for the production of bio-gas. At the same time the water holding capacity of the land is increased and flood risk reduced.

Elsewhere, health and wellbeing solutions are being planned by LNP partners. By increasing the availability and access to high quality greenspace close to where people live, physical and mental well-being can be improved and absenteeism reduced, along with addressing some of the key health & wellbeing priorities for the county

4. Environment support for key growth projects

In addition to the game changer projects, the LNP has been supporting the delivery of growth in a number of other ways.

Overcoming planning delay

Stroud District Council and Tewkesbury Borough Council (along with South Gloucestershire Council) have agreed to participate in the trialling of the Green Infrastructure Benchmark. In addition, the KTP Officer is working closely with Cotswold District Council on the development of GI within the Chesterton Development. If the trial is successful the aim is for the Benchmark to become the standard by which local authorities in Gloucestershire assess Green Infrastructure proposals.

Development of ESIF PA06

A major piece of work carried out by the LNP and led by Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust was the development of Thematic Objective 6 - Preserving and Protecting the Environment and Promoting Resource Efficiency - in the LEP's bid for ESIF funds. This was an excellent opportunity to connect the value of Gloucestershire's landscape and natural heritage with the local economy in terms of attracting inward investment and high calibre employees who wish to live and work in the county. The LNP is also represented on the LEP's ESIF Committee. £3.6m was secured as a result of the LNP's input into the application and partners' knowledge and expertise was utilised to identify priorities the fund could address which had both biodiversity benefits as well as benefits for the economy.

A workshop was held with DCLG officers in attendance in October to start to shape projects and the first call for projects was issued in December 2015. One bid was submitted for rolling out Natural Water Management activity across the county. However, following clarification fairly late on in the proceedings about what was eligible for ESIF funding three of the four themes have now been ruled ineligible and emphasis has been on developing the Green Infrastructure theme.

Stroud College and the Berkeley GREEN proposals

The proposal offers exciting opportunities for GI both onsite and offsite and these are currently being developed through the Master Planning process. GWT has reviewed the Sustainability Policy prepared by South Gloucestershire and Stroud College which is designed to inform the Berkeley GREEN development. It has a broad range and deals with all the issues expected from such a document. However, it hasn't really captured how many of the issues it deals with can be brought together under the banner of multi-functional GI and GWT is currently in discussion with the consultant to make these linkages more specific.

Tidal Lagoons in the Severn Estuary

The LNP has been considering the prospect of major lagoon structures in the Severn Estuary and the impacts which these might have on this site of global environmental significance. The proposed schemes have the potential to generate up to 8% of the UK's energy requirements in a sustainable way. Given that climate change is the single greatest threat to biodiversity worldwide the LNP is keen to support such technology. However, the technology is untested and the risk of major negative impacts on the ecology of the estuary is very real. Despite these concerns the LNP is working with the promoters – TLP – to identify issues and potential impacts and to also consider how these impacts might be mitigated.

This is probably the biggest challenge for the LNP in terms of risk to irreplaceable natural capital but its willingness to take a solutions-based approach is testament to its new way of working. There is still a long way to go in identifying and addressing all the issues raised by the scheme and a sustainable solution seems a long way off. However, the liaison with TLP continues and they will be attending the LNP's next meeting in April.

Cinderford Norther Quarter

The LNP has taken a particular interest in this controversial scheme in the Forest of Dean. It has become a case study in what can go wrong if ecological issues are not considered at the very earliest opportunity. The ambitions to regenerate this former colliery site on the edge of Cinderford and provide much needed employment ran far ahead of any consideration of the

ecological impact that might arise. A brown field site - and old tip - was not considered of any special interest, yet left undisturbed for over fifty years the site had developed to become one of the richest wildlife sites in the District. This biodiversity – including a raft of legally protected species - was not recognised until the scheme was well developed and it is now apparent what the implications of this have been, in terms of delays and considerable expense – and a mitigation scheme which still falls short of what exemplar development should be delivering.

The LNP – and particularly GWT, RSPB and GNS through their engagement with CREF (Cinderford Regeneration Environment Forum) - will continue to work to try to get maximum ecological benefits from the scheme.

A417 Missing Link

The LEP has established that the bottleneck created by the existing road network at Birdlip is having significant negative impacts on the County's economy. This has long been recognised as a problem that needs addressing, but at the same time there are acknowledged constraints to the major upgrading of a road on a prominent position on the scarp within the protected landscape of the Cotswold Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). There are ecological and historic constraints too with land either side of Birdlip Hill designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Scheduled Ancient Monuments (SAM).

The LNP has been positive in its approach to addressing the need to solve the problem and in April 2015 established a sub-Group and agreed basic principles recognising that the upgrading presented major opportunities for ecological enhancement. The LNP is keen to be involved in the development of an exemplar scheme which maximises the environmental opportunities. To this end it has already had a presentation from Highways England on how the scheme will progress and partners have attended meetings with the County Council and Highways England to learn more about this. LNP partners also had a fact finding visit to Hindhead where the upgrading of the old A3 has resulted in major ecological gains and extended land owned by the National Trust.

5. Moving forward

The close working relationship between the LEP and LNP in the last year has supported the development of some real environmental innovation in the county. Both the water management and green infrastructure 'game changer' projects demonstrate Gloucestershire leading the way nationally on key environmental growth agendas.

Much environmental funding and legislation has been developed in Europe, therefore the referendum decision is likely to cause ongoing uncertainty for the next couple of years. Defra is at the same time developing a 25 year plan for both the environment and for farming. While a new national framework for the environment will be developed in the medium term, local shaping looks likely to remain a key theme, so continuing to work closely on proactively identifying potential environmental threats and challenges. We want to continue to work together to recognise that maintaining and enhancing Gloucestershire's environmental assets is a precondition for effective growth.

In the next year we would like to focus on:

- Working much earlier with the pipeline of LEP growth projects to identify opportunities for environmental enhancement well ahead of their full development;

- To normalise across the county pilot projects promoting green infrastructure and natural water management;
- To continue to develop cutting edge game changer innovation that supports both growth and environmental improvement;
- To continue to work closely with the promoters of large infrastructure projects to maximise opportunities for environmental enhancement;
- To continue to provide a coherent environmental voice that brings key players in Gloucestershire together.