Planning for biodiversity and the natural environment in Hertfordshire – guiding principles

Purpose of this document
The Hertfordshire LNP does not have the resources to respond to consultations on local plan documents. It has prepared this document to outline some high level principles that it would expect to underpin local plan documents and planning authorities' decision-making with respect to the planning of sustainable development.

This is not intended to be exhaustive guidance, much of which is covered elsewhere and nationally, as referenced in this document. Instead, it aims to summarise some of the most important high level principles in relation to planning and biodiversity and provides signposting to guidance and advice in other documents. The emphasis is on adding value from a local perspective.

Six principles of planning for biodiversity and the natural environment
1. Recognise the value of the natural environment and the range of benefits and services it provides
2. Protect and enhance existing biodiversity assets
3. Seek opportunities to improve habitat connectivity
4. Integrate biodiversity opportunities within new development
5. Make decisions informed by the best available ecological information and data
6. Secure the long term management of existing and new habitats/sites

Introduction
There are 48 Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) across England. Local Nature Partnerships are a key commitment of the Government's Natural Environment White Paper, *The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature*[1], which was published in July 2011 and are intended to achieve the aspirations of the White Paper locally.

The Natural Environment White Paper outlines Government's vision for the natural environment and marks a shift in emphasis from piecemeal conservation action to one of restoring habitats on a landscape-scale. The new Biodiversity Strategy for England[2] published in 2011 builds on the White Paper and sets out how our international commitments on biodiversity translate into action in England. The 2020 mission is: *to halt overall biodiversity loss, support healthy well-functioning ecosystems and establish coherent ecological networks, with more and better places for nature for the benefit of wildlife and people.*

Planning has a key role in achieving the objectives set out in the Natural Environment White Paper and England Biodiversity Strategy by guiding development to the most appropriate locations, encouraging greener design and enabling development to enhance natural networks.

The Hertfordshire LNP
The Hertfordshire LNP was formally established in September 2012, when it received Government recognition and was awarded LNP status. The LNP has developed its vision for Hertfordshire: *a diverse, resilient natural environment which is contributing at local levels to the achievement of environmental, social and economic outcomes*

and is able to adapt to climate change, future challenges and the changing needs of society and nature.

One of its key objectives includes 'to establish resilient ecological networks supporting healthy well-functioning ecosystems and providing a range of benefits for wildlife and people'. Its ambition is for 'restored and connected habitats across the whole county, creating resilient wildlife populations and allowing wildlife to adapt to climate change and other pressures'. This reflects the vision and spirit of the Natural Environment White Paper.

Duty to cooperate
LNPs have been identified as bodies that those covered by the duty to cooperate 'should have regard to' when preparing local plans[i]. The Hertfordshire LNP does not have the capacity to respond to planning policy consultation documents and has established a Planning Task Group to identify how it can inform Local Plans and work with Local Planning Authorities as part of the duty to cooperate. The Task Group has outlined some key guiding principles for Local Planning Authorities to follow to support the LNP in working towards achieving a resilient natural environment in Hertfordshire alongside sustainable economic growth. The LNP would expect to see these principles embedded in the local planning authorities' approach to plan-making and decision-taking with respect to the protection and improvement of the natural environment in Hertfordshire.

More information on the duty to cooperate and what it requires is available at the planning practice guidance website at:
http://planningguidance.planningportal.gov.uk/blog/guidance/duty-to-cooperate/what-is-the-duty-to-cooperate-and-what-does-it-require/

Principle 1: Recognise the value of the natural environment and the range of benefits and services it provides
The natural environment provides us with a wide range of benefits, often described as 'ecosystem services'. These range from the provision of materials such as food, timber and fresh water to natural processes such as climate regulation through carbon sequestration and storage and the reduction of flood risk through water storage. It is also important for our wellbeing, improving people's health and quality of life. The natural environment needs to be able to function effectively for us to get all of these benefits.

The planning system must now recognise the wider benefits of ecosystem services[ii]. Policies and decisions should encourage opportunities for land use to deliver multiple benefits and functions; for wildlife, recreation, flood risk mitigation, carbon storage, and food production. Where land performs a range of functions it affords a far greater range of social, environmental and economic benefits than might otherwise be delivered.

Signposts to further information:
- Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2006). *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Synthesis Reports.*
  http://www.maweb.org/en/index.aspx

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[i] Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2012 which came into force on 12th November 2012.
[ii] National Planning Policy Framework 2012, paragraph 109, p.25.

- UK National Ecosystem Assessment (2011). *The UK National Ecosystem Assessment: Synthesis of the key findings*. UNEP-WCMC, Cambridge http://uknea.unep-wcmc.org/Resources/tabid/82/Default.aspx
- Defra (2010). *What nature can do for you: a practical introduction to making the most of natural services, assets and resources in policy and decision making.*

Principle 2: Protect and enhance existing biodiversity assets

Although there have been some conservation successes in recent years, biodiversity loss and degradation of ecosystems continue. The recent report, *State of Nature*[3], shows just how significant the losses are. Given the scale of biodiversity loss and the degradation of ecosystem services, plans and projects not only need to protect what we have but also must enhance it wherever possible. This is a vital part of ensuring a sustainable natural environment for future generations.

Green Infrastructure provides opportunities to protect and enhance the natural environment. The Hertfordshire Strategic Green Infrastructure (GI) Plan[4] provides the framework for GI planning and design in Hertfordshire and outlines a series of potential projects to take forward the GI network. Opportunities for the enhancement and creation of Green Infrastructure at a more local level are identified in the Hertfordshire District GI plans.

Planning policies and decision-making should seek to protect and enhance areas designated for their biodiversity importance, as appropriate to their level of significance. This includes full protection for internationally and nationally designated sites - including Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas, Ramsar Sites and Sites of Special Scientific Interest - and effective protection measures for ancient woodland, Local Nature Reserves and Local Wildlife Sites[iii].

Development projects should minimise impacts on biodiversity by adhering to the 'mitigation hierarchy' of 'avoid, mitigate, compensate'. In order to properly identify the potential harm to biodiversity it is important that the biodiversity value of development sites is properly understood. Appropriate levels of ecological surveys will help identify what habitats and species exist at the site before a planning application is submitted.

Signposts to further information:
- Association of Local Government Ecologists (ALGE) (2011). *Biodiversity Planning Toolkit*. http://www.biodiversityplanningtoolkit.com/
- RSPB, CIEEM and the RTPI (July 2013). *Planning naturally: spatial planning with nature in mind: in the UK and beyond.* http://www.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/policy/planning/planningnaturally.aspx
- Town & Country Planning Association and The Wildlife Trusts (July 2012). *Planning for a healthy environment: good practice guidance for green infrastructure and biodiversity.* http://www.tcpa.org.uk/pages/planning-for-a-healthy-environment-good-practice-for-green-infrastructure-and-biodiversity.html

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[iii] The Hertfordshire Wildlife Sites Partnership operates the Local Sites system in Hertfordshire, a partnership approach to the identification, selection, assessment and protection of Local Wildlife Sites in the county.

Principle 3: Seek opportunities to improve habitat connectivity

The UK National Ecosystems Assessment (UK NEA)[5] and the independent review of England's wildlife sites, *Making Space for Nature*[6], demonstrated that our biodiversity and natural infrastructure is fragmented. It concluded that: 1) England's collection of wildlife areas (both legally protected areas and others) does not currently represent a coherent and resilient ecological network that would be capable of responding to the challenges of climate change and other pressures; and, 2) the quality of natural habitats must be improved throughout the countryside, while strategic action must be taken to plug gaps in the ecological network. The Natural Environment White Paper, informed by these findings, strongly endorses the need to not only protect and improve existing sites but to expand and join them to restore ecological network connectivity and function at a landscape-scale. The planning system plays a key role in delivering this.

The impact of development on the connectivity and coherence of the ecological network must be considered. Development should be planned to avoid habitat loss and fragmentation, and opportunities should be sought to improve ecological connectivity, including through the creation, restoration and enhancement of linking habitats and 'stepping stones' through the landscape.

Local authorities are advised to take a strategic approach to planning for nature and to identify and map components of local ecological networks[iv], including Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs). Existing and potential ecological networks for Hertfordshire have now been identified through the 2013 Hertfordshire ecological networks mapping report and guidance on how to interpret and apply the report findings is currently being produced. The report and GIS layers of habitat network maps are available to local planning authorities on request from the Herts Environmental Records Centre (HERC). Habitat network maps should not be viewed as a barrier to development; instead they can guide the location of development and the location, design and management of habitat protection, restoration and creation measures.

The Hertfordshire LNP Board has endorsed the Hertfordshire component of the Lea Catchment NIA, identifying and agreeing it as the county's first locally determined NIA. The LNP recognises the significant improvements the NIA will be making to the ecological network through enhancing and enlarging existing wildlife sites, improving ecological connectivity and creating new habitats. The LNP would encourage the relevant authorities to engage with the Lea Catchment Partnership to discuss how they might identify the NIA in their Local Plans. This includes St Albans, Welwyn Hatfield, North Herts, Stevenage, East Herts and Broxbourne.

Signposts to further information:
- Hertfordshire ecological networks mapping report – available on request from the Herts Environmental Records Centre (HERC) http://www.hercinfo.org.uk/
- Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust (2012). *How to build a Living Landscape*. http://www.hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/what-we-do/building-living-landscape

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[iv] National Planning Policy Framework 2012, paragraph 109, p.27.

Principle 4: Integrate biodiversity opportunities within new development
The natural environment and biodiversity needs to be a key theme within the masterplan for any new development and included in the early stages of the design process, as with other infrastructure, in order to ensure it is properly linked and functional.

The design of a development should aim to reflect and enhance the area's locally distinctive character, as outlined in the Hertfordshire ecological networks mapping report and Hertfordshire's Landscape Character Assessments[7]. Existing biodiversity features, for example habitats of principal importance, ancient woodland and hedgerows, should all be considered in the design process. Providing links between important habitats on and off-site and allowing space around them to act as a buffer will assist in the movement and dispersal of wildlife and plant species.

The built environment should also aim to be permeable to wildlife. This can be achieved via wildlife-friendly landscaping and gardening and through integrating spaces for nature in buildings themselves. Examples of biodiversity measures that can be incorporated into developments include installing artificial nest sites to provide nesting and roosting opportunities for birds, bats and some invertebrates and planting living (green) roofs and walls to provide valuable habitats in areas that are often lacking in biodiversity. This should be guided by what is locally appropriate. The many ways in which trees perform valuable roles in developments is highlighted in the *Case for Trees*[8].

Signposts to further information:
- Hertfordshire Building Futures
  http://www.hertslink.org/buildingfutures
- Murphy, B., Gunnell, K. and Williams, C. (2013). *Designing for Biodiversity: A Technical Guide for New and Existing Buildings* (2nd edition). London: RIBA Publishing.
  http://ribabookshops.com/item/designing-for-biodiversity-a-technical-guide-for-new-and-existing-buildings-2nd-edition/79859/
- TCPA (2004) *Biodiversity by Design: A Guide to Sustainable Communities.* London: Town and Country Planning Association.
  http://www.tcpa.org.uk/pages/biodiversity-by-design.html
- UK-GBC Biodiversity Task Group (2009) *Biodiversity and the Built Environment.* London: UK Green Building Council.
  http://www.ukgbc.org/resources/publication/uk-gbc-task-group-report-biodiversity-and-built-environment

Principle 5: Make decisions informed by the best available ecological information and data
Local Plans and development should be informed by the latest ecological data and evidence and by local knowledge and expertise. The Hertfordshire ecological networks mapping report should be used to inform opportunities for the restoration of ecological networks, as well as more detailed guidance on how and what to implement where.

The Herts Environmental Records Centre (HERC) holds and develops datasets on existing ecological features and potential constraints. Such datasets are important to inform Local Plans and development. HERC has an ambition to improve data sharing

amongst partners to achieve better prioritised decision-making. It would therefore be beneficial if any data from ecology reports or ecological assessments submitted with planning applications is passed on to the Local Records Centre where possible.

Principle 6: Secure the long term management of existing and new habitats/sites

The long term management of key habitats and biodiversity features is vital to secure their intended benefits and monitoring schemes will be necessary to ensure the management aims are being met.

A funding plan for the ongoing management and maintenance of sites needs to be factored in from the start. There are several different models or approaches which can be taken; local authorities might include adequate capital and revenue provisions in their own budgets but planning agreements, the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and other developer contributions can all play a role. Sites can be managed by a dedicated charitable trust or in partnership with organisations with the necessary knowledge and skills to manage sites. Not-for-profit organisations and voluntary and community groups can contribute time and labour, raise funds and inspire local ownership to support and manage local sites.

How should Local Planning Authorities use these guiding principles?

Local Planning Authorities should use these guiding principles to:
- Achieve strong policies in their Local Plans to protect and enhance biodiversity in Hertfordshire.
- Ensure their Local Plans are informed by the latest ecological data and evidence.
- Plan development to avoid habitat loss and fragmentation and identify opportunities to improve the ecological connectivity between habitats.
- Consider the multiple benefits and functions that can be delivered by healthy ecosystems.

References

[1]HM Document (2011). *The Natural Choice: Securing the Value of Nature*. TSO (The Stationery Office).

[2]Defra (2011). *Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services*.

[3]Burns F, Eaton MA, Gregory RD, *et al*. (2013). *State of Nature report*. The State of Nature partnership.

[4]Land Use Consultants (2011). *Hertfordshire Strategic Green Infrastructure Plan (Incorporating the GreenArc Area)*.

[5]UK National Ecosystem Assessment (2011). *The UK National Ecosystem Assessment: Synthesis of the key findings*. UNEP-WCMC, Cambridge

[6]Lawton, J.H., Brotherton, P.N.M., Brown, V.K., Elphick, C., Fitter, A.H., Forshaw, J., Haddow, R.W., Hilborne, S., Leafe, R.N., Mace, G.M., Southgate, M.P., Sutherland, W.J., Tew, T.E., Varley, J., & Wynne, G.R. (2010*). Making Space for Nature: a review of England's wildlife sites and ecological network*. Report to Defra.

[7]Hertfordshire Landscape Character Area statements – available to view at: http://www.hertsdirect.org/services/leisculture/heritage1/landscape/hlca/lcacoll/

[8]Forestry Commission (2010). *The case for trees in development and the urban environment.*
http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/INFD-87YEK2