

Agenda Item 8



Policy and Scrutiny

Open Report on behalf of Richard Wills, Executive Director for Environment and Economy

Report to:	Environment and Economy Scrutiny Committee
Date:	10 April 2018
Subject:	'A Green Future': Defra's twenty-five year plan to improve the environment

Summary:

Defra has published a plan setting out its vision for long term environmental improvement over the next twenty five years. It builds on a number of key policy and research documents published over the last ten years, and aims to drive environmental improvement as an integral part of achieving social resilience and economic growth. As such, it is one of three linked Government strategies with the Industrial Strategy and the Sustainable Growth Strategy.

Actions Required:

Members are asked to consider the key proposals within Defra's 25 year Plan, and guide officers in implementing them within the Council's Commissioning Strategies.

Because of the wide-ranging scope of the Environment Plan, Members may also wish to consider further exploration of specific subject areas at future meetings as LCC develops its response to this new policy direction.

1. Background

In January this year Defra published a twenty-five year plan, setting out its proposals for improving the environment. This builds on previous research and policy publications – notably published in the Lawton report of 2010 and the 'Natural Choice' white paper of 2011. The overarching drive of these documents was the need to develop a more holistic view of environmental improvement as a key element in securing sustainable growth, rather than as a separate 'add-on'.

The present plan – 'A Green Future' – is therefore designed as part of a trio of long term Government documents, including the Industrial Strategy and the Sustainable Growth Strategy. Its central concept is that of understanding and valuing the country's natural capital as a limited resource that is essential to all aspects of the UK economy, as well as to the health and security of its people. As such, its improvement becomes a matter of economic and social sustainability in its own right.

The 25 year plan sets out six long term goals for the environment over the period:

- Clean air
- Clean and plentiful water
- Thriving plants and wildlife
- Reduced risk of harm from environmental hazards e.g. flooding and drought
- Using resources from nature more sustainably and more efficiently
- Enhanced beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment

A further four goals are established to manage pressure on the environment:

- Mitigating and adapting to climate change
- Minimising waste
- Managing exposure to chemicals
- Enhancing biosecurity

These are addressed in the plan through six broad priority areas, for each of which a range of proposals for action is set out. The priority areas are:

- Using and managing land sustainably
- Recovering nature and enhancing the beauty of landscapes
- Connecting people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing
- Increasing resource efficiency and reducing pollution and waste
- Securing clean, healthy, productive and biologically diverse seas and oceans
- Protecting and improving our global environment

In broad terms, the plan envisages a range of measures to be taken by Government to support implementation of the plan as a whole:

- Consulting on a new independent body to hold Government to account
- A new set of environmental principles to underpin policy-making
- Developing a set of metrics to assess progress towards 25 year goals
- Refreshing the plan regularly
- Strengthening leadership and delivery through better local planning, more effective partnerships and learning from four pioneer projects
- Establishing a new green business council and exploring the potential for a natural environment impact fund
- Working closely with a large range of stakeholders during 2018-19 to identify their contribution to the plan's goals

In addition to these measures, there are specific proposals relating to each of the themed areas noted above. The main proposals for each are outlined below.

Using and managing land sustainably

An 'environmental net gain' principle is envisaged for development, embedded in national planning policy for housing and infrastructure, along with a new incentivised environmental land management system and action to improve soil

health and protect peatlands. Expansion of tree cover by planting 11,000,000 trees is proposed, with a further 1,000,000 urban trees, with greater use of natural flood risk management.

There is considerable emphasis on ensuring that the Government objective of securing extra homes by 2035 (100,000 in Lincolnshire) is undertaken using the environmental net gain principle, focusing on achieving new development in the right places, with high environmental standards for all new builds, and enhancing the green belt in the process. A stated aim is to achieve this while reducing costs, complexity and delays for developers.

Proposals for a new environmental land management system to replace the CAP after Brexit takes a similarly holistic approach, focusing on a principle of paying farmers and land managers public money for providing public benefits, including incentivising restoration and improvement of natural capital assets and rural heritage. In addition a number of proposals for changes to water, fertiliser and pesticide use in farming are put forward, together with improvements to soil health and protection and restoration of peatlands. Government is currently consulting on its twenty-five year agricultural strategy (item 9 on the present agenda), which contains considerably more detail on potential arrangements for agriculture following Brexit.

The twenty-five year plan proposes a major increase in large-scale tree planting, with the creation of a new Northern Forest, but there is also an emphasis on securing economic benefit from woodland management, including promotion of domestic hardwood timber production. The appointment of a national Tree Champion is envisaged to help implement this section of the plan.

In relation to flood risk management, the plan focuses on promoting 'natural' methods of flood risk, typically using a range of methods to slow the flow and reduce pressure on lowland systems. This is set alongside increasing use of sustainable drainage systems in new developments and improving the resilience and recovery potential of properties at risk of flooding.

Recovering nature and enhancing the beauty of landscapes

The key proposals here are based on developing a Nature Recovery Network, backed up by a national Strategy for Nature, to protect threatened species and reintroduce lost wildlife species where appropriate. This builds on core conclusions of the 2010 Lawton Report, and includes a commitment to provide 500,000 hectares of additional wildlife habitat, with a close connection to green and blue infrastructure provision through the local planning system. It also links into proposals outlined above for peatland restoration and for natural flood risk management solutions.

The plan suggests the potential for establishing up to twenty five new landscape or catchment scale nature recovery areas to help implement this approach, including legally binding conservation covenants with landowners as well as improved biosecurity to manage invasive species and reduce their environmental and

economic impact. Again, a strong link is made between such measures and opportunities for local community engagement and business development.

National Parks and AONBs (of which Lincolnshire has the only AONB in the East Midlands), are seen as key areas within the broader framework of the plan. The government states that it will commission a review of these areas covering designations, delivery of their objectives, funding and scope for environmental enhancement and expansion of AONBs and National Parks.

Sustainable water use is the third element of this section, centring on reforming the current water abstraction regime within a stronger catchment approach to water management, including regulating all significant water abstraction activity that has previously been exempt from the regulatory system. This is intended, among other things, to encourage greater use of water trading and storage. The plan envisages reporting progress in this area to Parliament in 2019, with an expanded regulatory regime in place in 2022.

Alongside these measures are proposals to encourage water companies to implement long-term plans for large scale infrastructure provision, enabling water transfer and storage, while also promoting a fall in the amount of water used by households, and a reduction in leakage from supply systems.

Connecting people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing

This section focuses on methods of improving public health through environmental access and other direct benefits. It builds on previous research that highlights the benefits – particularly to mental health – observed in people whose engagement with the natural environment is enhanced. As such, the plan proposes a three-year 'natural environment for health and wellbeing' programme, focusing on multi-agency promotion of access to the natural environment as a pathway towards good health and wellbeing.

Several initiatives are outlined to encourage children to engage with the natural environment, both through school activities and outside them, with an emphasis on promoting this approach in the most disadvantaged areas, and making it easier for schools and pupil referral units to establish programmes of access to the natural environment from 2019 onwards.

A further element is described as 'greening' towns and cities, placing emphasis on the existing presumption in the NPPF in favour of sustainable development, and in particular on the creation of a national framework for green infrastructure standards. A specific aspect of this is a push to plant 1m urban trees in addition to those outlined above, along with a proposal to place new requirements on councils to properly consult local communities before removing street trees.

It is also proposed to make 2019 a year of action for the environment, working with youth and environmental partners to help children and young people from all backgrounds to engage with nature and improve the environment.

Increasing resource efficiency and reducing pollution and waste

This section of the plan develops a number of existing policy directions, but seeks to link them into a broader environmental agenda across departments. A new national Resources and Waste Strategy is proposed for 2018 to achieve the Government's target of zero avoidable waste by 2050 (and zero avoidable plastic waste by 2042) and doubling resource productivity over this period. An explicit link is made to the Industrial Strategy's promotion of a regenerative, circular economy, in this case in the context of improving the health of the environment.

A commitment to comprehensive and frequent waste and recycling collections is reiterated, with considerable emphasis upon returning as much high quality material back into the economy as possible, with the aim of stimulating internal and export markets. In addition to this, a Bioeconomy Strategy is planned, to replace dependence on fossil fuels with a 'bio-based' economy, using bioscience and biotechnology.

This approach is accompanied by a reaffirmation of commitments to reduce food supply chain emissions and food waste, with a goal expressed to end food waste entering landfill by 2030. Recent interest in the impact of plastic waste is reflected in the plan by a commitment to deliver a new national anti-litter campaign, and a particular emphasis on avoiding plastics and litter entering the marine environment.

The plan provides further backing for continuing to explore greater benefits in managing residual waste through Energy from Waste facilities, while additional action is proposed through the Resources and Waste Strategy to improve detection and prevention of fly-tipping and waste crime.

Pollution reduction more generally is addressed through a proposed new Clean Air Strategy, to be released for consultation in 2018, and there are proposals to extend the regulatory regime to cover medium sized combustion plants. It is also suggested that legislative controls could be extended over low cost, small scale flexible power generators that have grown rapidly in recent years, particularly where these are fuelled by diesel and emit high level of nitrogen oxide.

A new Chemicals Strategy is proposed to control pollution from chemicals used for industry, agriculture, food systems and homes, and additional regulatory controls are considered to minimise the risk of chemical contamination in water and the aquatic environment. This is extended to include maintenance of standards with regard to leisure and bathing waters.

Securing clean, healthy, productive and biologically diverse seas and oceans

The impact of waste and plastics on the marine environment is considered in the previous section, but the plan also includes a range of measures intended to improve marine ecosystems more broadly. A key proposal is driven by withdrawal from the CAP, and consists of a Fisheries White Paper, leading to a new Fisheries Bill, with the aim of replacing current CAP regulations with a sustainable policy towards fisheries in UK waters. Redressing issues arising from overfishing is singled out as of particular significance.

The existing UK Marine Strategy is to be reviewed and strengthened alongside marine spatial planning and licensing systems intended to support proportionate management, enable growth and provide greater certainty for industry and investors.

Protecting and improving our global environment

This is the largest section in scope and geographical spread, setting out a plan for the UK's global engagement in tackling climate change and protecting biodiversity on the international stage. Four key areas are covered.

- Providing international leadership and leading by example in tackling climate change and protecting and improving international biodiversity
- Helping developing nations protect and improve the environment by providing assistance and supporting disaster planning
- Supporting and protecting international forests and sustainable agriculture
- Leaving a lighter footprint in the global environment by enhancing sustainability and supporting zero deforestation supply chains

These are envisaged as continuing with the international framework of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and builds on existing arrangements for climate change mitigation, combating the illegal wildlife trade, international development and disaster planning.

2. Conclusion

It will be apparent that many of the areas covered by Defra's Environment Plan directly affect services across LCC, particularly, but not exclusively, in the Environment and Economy Director Area. LCC's Commissioning Strategies seek to embed a mutually reinforcing, cross-cutting approach between service areas and directorates, and this lends itself to engaging with the multi-agency, multiple benefit focus that is found in the Environment Plan.

Among the main features of the Plan, its emphasis on natural capital as a fundamental economic and social asset provides considerable support to priority economic sectors as defined in the Greater Lincolnshire LEP's Strategic Economic Plan. Arrangements to replace the Common Agricultural Policy will be an important factor in developing agri-food businesses and LCC is currently engaged in a Government consultation on this matter.

The Plan presents significant opportunities for LCC's Countryside Services and the Wolds AONB management team, but there are also potentially important ramifications for planning and development control, flood risk management and SuDS advice provided to Local Planning Authorities, waste management services (particularly in the context of the Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy currently in development), carbon management and sustainability, transport policy and infrastructure. In all these areas LCC works closely with a range of partners,

some of whom, for example District Councils, have statutory duties that are likely to be affected by the policies and actions proposed.

A good example of this is LCC's strategic planning role, which involves cross-service co-ordination in working with LPAs to develop their Local Plans. Changes to the NPPF will be an important element in this area of work, and is likely to have a direct impact on LCC as a consultee to Local Plans and as a waste and minerals planning authority in its own right. The same is also true of flood risk and development management, with a greater emphasis on promoting the use of natural flood management approaches and on SuDS.

The focus on health and wellbeing benefits also presents opportunities to engage further with Public Health and health services more broadly, and to be able to quantify the benefits of any interventions to a greater extent than has previously been the case.

The range of subject matter covered by the Plan means that a more detailed exploration of these areas will require a 'subject-by-subject' approach, and members may wish to consider whether there are any specific areas of interest that they might wish to examine in this way.

3. Consultation

a) Have Risks and Impact Analysis been carried out?

No

b) Risks and Impact Analysis

N/A

4. Background Papers

Document title	Where the document can be viewed
A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan
The Natural Choice: Securing the Value of Nature (2011)	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-natural-choice-securing-the-value-of-nature
'Making Space for Nature' (The Lawton Report, 2010)	http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130402170324/http://archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/biodiversity/documents/201009space-for-nature.pdf

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