

# Nature Positive Local Plans

Research report  
May 2015



giving  
nature  
a home



Protecting  
wildlife for  
the future



Report prepared by



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## i) Executive Summary of Findings

This executive summary highlights key findings of the research set out in more detail within the report.

Across Core Strategies for 30 English Local Planning Authorities adopted since 2013:-

### Strategic Planning for Biodiversity

- Although some good examples were identified, the general standard of mapping for Core Strategies is not sufficiently specific or comprehensive enough to adequately guide development decisions or properly inform plan users.
- **Less than one third** of Core Strategies present a clear strategic approach to planning for biodiversity where the distribution of development is positively influenced by wildlife considerations and there is coherent planning for biodiversity at a landscape scale. For **more than a third** of Core Strategies there was no convincing evidence of biodiversity being a core determinant of overall spatial strategy. **The NPPF's policy for biodiversity planning at a landscape scale has not been widely embedded in Core Strategies.**
- There is a common reliance in Core Strategies upon detail set out in other non-planning documents or strategies (such as Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs) or Green Infrastructure Strategies) but these do **not benefit from the status of development plan policy.**

### Biodiversity Mapping

- *Where they occur* in an authority's plan area, internationally and nationally designated biodiversity sites were found to be illustrated in almost **90%** of Core Strategies either diagrammatically or in (relative) detail within the mapped elements.
- Locally designated sites are **not usually** illustrated within Core Strategies but commonly retained as mapped elements of saved plan proposals maps. In terms of 'usability' such cross-reference is cumbersome and does not help ease of use or understanding of the plan.
- Elements of Green Infrastructure and ecological networks were noted in over **70%** of the plans, but the detail and scope of these varies markedly.
- Priority Habitats were mapped in **less than 5%** of plans. **Less than 20%** of core strategies had spatially expressed habitat restoration priorities.

- Where Nature Improvement Areas are established, **only half** of Core Strategies map these.

### Designated Sites

- **All plans set some degree of policy** for protection of designated sites. However, differentiation in policy criteria for the consideration of internationally, nationally and locally designated sites **is often weak** with many plans referring generally to the protection and enhancement of designated sites. Some good practice is also evident.
- **All plans** set out an explicit position in policy or supporting text in relation to the need to protect and enhance designated biodiversity sites, although the specificity and relative significance afforded by plans varied considerably. Where international sites are located within the plan area, their relative status and legal standing was identified in **over 80%** of relevant plans.
- Policy for reducing the impact on designated sites from surrounding areas is less established with **less than two thirds of plans** effectively or partially seeking to manage indirect impacts where there are designated sites. **Less than 20%** of plans set overtly restrictive approaches to development in areas that may have indirect impacts upon designated biodiversity sites.

### Ecological Networks

- **Only 20%** of Core Strategies identify cross-boundary biodiversity matters that might need to be addressed in cooperation with other local planning authorities.
- Local Nature Partnerships were referenced in **only six** of the sample plans, usually in connection with Nature Improvement Areas.
- **Around 75%** of plans include general **policy or strategic statements** in relation to wider biodiversity enhancements and habitat connectivity, de-fragmentation of wildlife corridors, achieving LBAP objectives and securing net gain in biodiversity over the plan period. The study found that very few core strategies expressed clear spatial structures for this or made specific reference to Biodiversity 2020.
- Conversely, Core Strategies are **less robust** in setting out what specific measures or actions secured through the planning system are required to realise those ecological network aspirations, with **around 50%** of the sample going some way to present these.
- Reference to detailed biodiversity policy was frequently deferred to other issue-specific strategies, such as Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs).

- Core Strategies do not set out policy frameworks that require Habitat Management Plans in relation to specific development types.

### Priority Species and Habitats

- Around **65%** of Core Strategies set a positive or partially positive context for the preservation, restoration and re-creation of Priority Habitats, and the protection and recovery of Priority Species populations. However, strategic policy and supporting text were not strongly backed-up with finer grain specificity in policy, although good examples were evident.
- **Over 75%** of Core Strategies set **some degree** of positive context for the conservation and enhancement of species populations outside designated sites. However, these were set as strategic level aspirations and did not explicitly relate to delivery of the overall objectives of the Birds and Habitats Directives, although such benefits might be expected to accrue.
- Explicit reference to legislative background for species protection and obligations was infrequently and inconsistently set out in Core Strategies.
- **Over 70%** of plans presented some degree of explicit reference to on-going management of habitats created through planning permissions. However, explicit policy criteria for this would not be a pre-condition to such requirements being secured.
- **No** core strategies were found to explicitly refer to Management Plans of publicly owned sites supporting Priority Habitats or Species, whether or not working with Natural England.

### Green Infrastructure and Local Green Spaces

- **Around 70%** of plans set out explicit - or were moving towards, development of a spatially specific Green Infrastructure policy component of the plan. In general the *concept* of Green Infrastructure is **well-established** in Core Strategies.
- *Specific* reference to Local Green Spaces (locally identified protected open spaces of particular value to local communities as facilitated by 76 and 77) was **negligible** across the plan sample. However, a significant majority of Core Strategies set out policy for the protection and improved provision of accessible semi-natural green spaces, effectively serving to achieve the same community and environmental objectives. Similarly, explicit reference to Natural England's established ANGSt objectives was noted in **only three plans**.

- Around **80%** of the sample was found to explicitly require or indirectly encourage biodiversity-positive habitat features within new developments.
- Reference within Core Strategies to other biodiversity planning pertinent documents and publications varied considerably but was generally restricted to supporting appendices and evidence base studies, although some supporting text to policy referenced key contextual material explicitly.



## 1. Introduction and Background to the Research

- 1.1 The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds' (RSPB) is the leading charity that takes action for wild birds and the environment. It is the largest wildlife conservation organisation in Europe. It owns or manages around 150,000 hectares of land for nature conservation on 212 reserves throughout the UK. The Wildlife Trusts (TWTs) together have a membership of more than 800,000 and manage around 2,300 nature reserves covering more than 95,000 hectares. TWTs are dedicated to conserving the full range of UK habitats and species and securing nature's recovery on land and at sea.
- 1.2 This study has been prepared to help improve the RSPB's and TWTs' understanding of which biodiversity-focused policies of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) have been positively integrated into new Local Plans across England.
- 1.3 The Government published the NPPF in March 2012 and significantly reduced the volume of policy and guidance shaping planning processes and decision-making (although subsequent National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) adds operational level advice for planning system users). The NPPF now presents a strategic framework of policies, objectives and principles for all planning matters, including the consideration of biodiversity and the natural environment.
- 1.4 The NPPF sets out the broad concepts the government expects to be embedded within local development plans, particularly Local Plans, in relation to the management of the natural environment and fostering of biodiversity, as integral elements of sustainable development. The RSPB and TWTs were influential in shaping the final published policy framework for the natural environment.
- 1.5 This report is split into 6 sections:
  - Executive Summary;
  - *Introduction* (this section);
  - *Study Purpose and Objectives* which explains the objectives for the research;
  - *Method and Scope of the Study*, how the work was conducted, what was examined, its assumptions and limitations;

- *Summary of the NPPF's approach to biodiversity and the natural environment* to provide a full context for subsequent parts to the report; and
- *Analysis and Findings*, seeking to identify whether and which trends or patterns can be found across the study data.

## 2. Purpose and Objectives of the Research

- 2.1 The RSPB and The Wildlife Trusts were influential in shaping policy for the natural environment within the NPPF. After three years of the NPPF's influence on emerging Local Plans there is a need to examine how its aspirations are being translated - or otherwise, within the current wave of plans being adopted across the country.
- 2.2 The NPPF and pertinent planning legislation (particularly the *Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004*, the *Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012*, and the *Localism Act 2011*) have triggered a revised, re-focused and nation-wide round of Local Plan preparation by English Local Planning Authorities over recent years. This follows in the wake of considerable upheaval in the scope, format and hierarchy of development plans in England over the past decade or so through revocation of Regional Spatial Strategies (outside London), and the evolution of the multiple-document spatial plans, first presented as 'Local Development Frameworks' but now again referred to as 'Local Plans' (often *New Local Plans*). A challenging body of case law and vanguard plans being found to be 'unsound' after Examination can be seen to have influenced many LPAs delaying, withdrawing or starting again on the lengthy process of Local Plan production. Consequently after 3 years of the NPPF there remains much activity, but also uncertainty, reticence and on-going evolution in the style, content and scope in local plan-making.
- 2.3 Local plans must be positively prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national policy in accordance with Section 20 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended) and the National Planning Policy Framework. Section 38 of the Act maintains a *plan-led* system in England such that development decisions should be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Therefore, it is imperative that on adoption, local plans present a comprehensive, effective and aspirational approach to conservation and enhancement of the natural environment if national objectives for biodiversity are to be fostered through the operation of the planning system.
- 2.4 The RSPB and TWTs were instrumental in ensuring that the final version of the NPPF was more environmentally focused than initial drafts. Significantly, it influenced the inclusion of the following key principles within the final published NPPF:-
- The definition of sustainable development is based on the five guiding principles of the UK Sustainable Development Strategy, including *living within environmental limits*;

- The ‘presumption in favour of sustainable development’ (NPPF 14) specifically excludes developments that should be refused because of other specific restrictive policies for Natura 2000 sites, SSSIs, and the Green Belt etc; and
- Nature conservation policies should positively support coherent ecological networks, landscape-scale planning, Nature Improvement Areas, Local Nature Partnerships, and a more explicit policy protecting SSSIs.

2.5 The RSPB has stated that the NPPF now presents a strategic policy framework for the natural environment which compares favourably to the previous framework set out primarily in *Planning Policy Statement 9: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation* (August 2005). However, these policies will be most effective once embedded within local policy and implemented positively through the operation of the planning system. In setting a streamlined framework of national policy for the natural environment, the NPPF has afforded a significant degree of flexibility in relation to *how* local planning authorities apply its provisions to local circumstances. For the RSPB and TWTs to maintain an informed engagement with the planning system it is important that we understand how the NPPF is being implemented and that this is based upon empirical evidence. This report will help to develop that understanding.

2.6 The core objectives of this research project are therefore to:

- **Audit biodiversity policies in recent local plans;**
- **Identify lessons from current practice (what makes a nature-positive local plan?); and**
- **Inform the RSPB’s and TWTs’ national and local advocacy on local plans and biodiversity.**

2.7 It should be noted that the study’s scope is limited to examination of strategic planning *policy*. It does not examine or consider how such policy is implemented on a day-to-day basis through Development Management processes. Good policy will only be effective in securing plan objectives when robustly implemented.



### 3. Method and Scope of the Study

- 3.1 This section presents an overview of the approach to the research and outlines the stages undertaken, its scope, study assumptions and limitations. The research has been overseen and guided by a joint project team of RSPB and TWTs officers based across a number of English regions.

#### 3.1 Study Sample

- 3.1.1 This study focuses primarily upon the review and analysis of a sample of *adopted*<sup>1</sup> Local Plans in respect to their adaptation of policy for biodiversity set out in the NPPF. The project relates to Local Plans in England only, typically 'Core Strategies' (or equivalent term)<sup>2</sup> that were adopted more than a year after the publication of the NPPF. As adopted plans they have all been found to have satisfied the *tests of soundness* by a Planning Inspector following Public Examination. Plans adopted from early 2013 onwards should have been fully influenced by the NPPF from early stages of preparation. The study review excludes Minerals and Waste Plans.
- 3.1.2 This study does not seek to present statistically significant quantitative analysis of the extent of policy adoption and application. At the time of this study approximately 50 Local Plan Core Strategies had been adopted since early 2013, with the remaining 300 or so LPAs having adopted a plan earlier than the study 2013 cut-off date (including pre-NPPF/post 2004 Act adoptions) or remain engaged in Local Plan preparation. This situation is rapidly evolving with many LPAs approaching advanced stages of plan preparation. Moreover, a significant proportion of LPAs that have adopted Core Strategies, are actively preparing other Development Plan Documents (DPDs), most typically 'Site Allocations' plans (specifically identifying sites for development or constraint) and 'Development Management Policies' plans setting out more detailed criteria-based policies for day-to-day control and determination of proposals which satisfy strategic policy of the Core Strategy.
- 3.1.3 The following chapters will show that the influence of local plans upon biodiversity and habitat matters is **not** confined to the policy content of Core Strategies, and that the suite of 'second tier' DPDs are highly likely to set out detailed policy and spatially specific allocations, boundaries and identify

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<sup>1</sup> With the exception of Knowsley Core Strategy which remains un-adopted although submitted in 2013.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'Core Strategy' is used across the report in relation to a local development plan's strategic components, usually including a spatial strategy, key diagram and strategic policies. Some sample plans use alternative nomenclature, such as 'Local Plan Part 1', 'Local Plan Strategy' or simply 'Local Plan'. Often these do not contain detailed local site allocation proposals or detailed policies for day-to-day Development Management purposes, but some do. The use of 'Core Strategy' is applied generally to strategic components of the sample Local Plan in this report.

designations. These have the potential to directly influence conservation and enhancement of the natural environment. Many of the plans reviewed expressly indicate the deferment of some biodiversity related policy and allocations to these plans.

- 3.1.4 In agreement with the RSPB project group a sample of 30 adopted Core Strategies was selected as the sample for this study<sup>3</sup>. These were selected upon geographical and regional characteristics only with no other qualifying considerations. Biodiversity assets and / or on-going engagement between LPAs and the RSPB and TWT were not determinants in selection. Hence adopted plans from all the English regions (apart from the North East<sup>4</sup>) are included, as are plans from diverse geographic areas, such as metropolitan, deeply rural, coastal, and suburban Boroughs, Districts and London Boroughs. Table 1 alphabetically lists the sample LPAs whose Core Strategies were reviewed.

**Table 1: Study Sample Local Plans (Core Strategies)**

LPA	Region	Adoption Date
Allerdale District Council	NW	16-07-14
Broadland, Norwich & South Norfolk	EoE	10-01-14
Broxtowe Borough Council	EM	17-09-14
Cannock Chase District Council	WM	11-06-14
Christchurch and East Dorset	SW	2-06-14
Croydon, London Borough of	London	19-06-14
Eastbourne Borough Council	SE	22-04-13
Fenland District Council	EoE	8-05-14
Gedling Borough Council	EM	15-12-14
Gravesham Borough Council	SE	30-09-14
Greenwich, Royal Borough of	London	20-02-13
Hertsmere Borough Council	EoE	30-07-14
Knowsley Borough Council	NW	Submitted 2013
Leeds City Council	Y&H	12-11-14
North Warwickshire Borough Council	WM	9-10-14
Northampton Borough Council	EM	10-09-14
Nottingham City Council	EM	16-01-13
Ribble Valley Borough Council	NW	16-12-14
Richmondshire District Council	Y&H	9-12-14
Rother District Council	SE	29-09-14
Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council	Y&H	10-09-14
Ryedale District Council	Y&H	16-10-13
Selby District Council	Y&H	22-10-13
Shepway District Council	SE	18-09-13

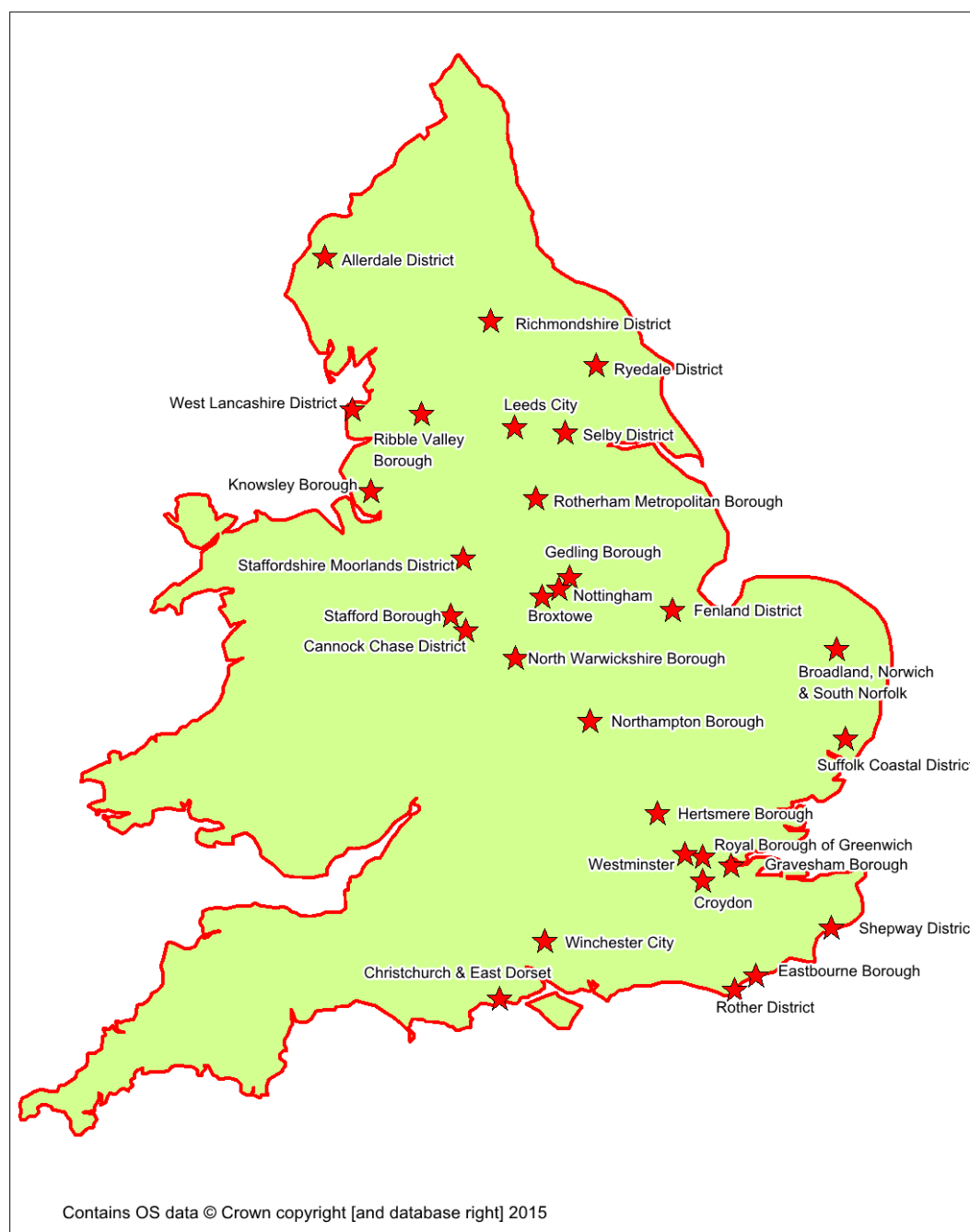
<sup>3</sup> Source: Planning Inspectorate's Register of Local Plan progress in England.

[http://www.planningportal.gov.uk/uploads/pins/local\\_plans/LPA\\_Core\\_Strategy\\_Progress.pdf](http://www.planningportal.gov.uk/uploads/pins/local_plans/LPA_Core_Strategy_Progress.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> No Local Plans adopted within the region at the time of research.

Stafford Borough Council	WM	17-09-14
Staffordshire Moorlands District Council	WM	26-03-14
Suffolk Coastal District Council	EoE	5-07-13
Westminster London Borough	London	13-11-13
West Lancashire District Council	NW	17-09-14
Winchester	SE	20-3-13

3.1.5 Map 1 illustrates the general distribution of the plan sample.



- 3.1.6 Ten of the sample plans were previously reviewed in 2014 as *phase 1* of the research carried out by RSPB *in-house* in 2014. This stage was carried out by RSPB officers at varying stages of plan progression and served effectively as a *pilot stage*, shaping the main research methodology. As a consequence of the subsequent progression of these plans through submission and examination stages, six of the pilot plans were fully re-assessed, independent to the original outputs. Four of the original assessments have been retained within the sample 30.

## 3.2 Scope of Assessment

- 3.2.1 The core component of the study is the examination of adopted Core Strategies and their inclusion (or otherwise) of particular NPPF biodiversity related policies set out in paragraphs 113-114 and 117-119. Principally, the project brief requires focus upon the following elements of the NPPF:
- Policies which require local plans to **create, enhance and manage networks of biodiversity and green infrastructure**, - paragraphs 114 (1<sup>st</sup> bullet) and 117 (bullets 1-3 and 5) of the NPPF, and
  - Policies to **protect Natura 2000 sites<sup>5</sup> and Sites of Special Scientific Interest** and **locally designated nature conservation sites** (principally paragraphs 113, 118 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> bullets, and paragraph 119 of the NPPF).
- 3.2.2 Section 4 of this report summarises the expectations of these paragraphs. Those NPPF policies that primarily address matters of landscape, brownfield land and other environmental policies such as resource management, climate change and air, water and soil quality are not within the scope of this research although it is clearly acknowledged that such environmental issues can have significant influence on the well-being of biodiversity and habitat networks.
- 3.2.3 The RSPB / TWT research team devised the research tests.
- 3.2.4 The research focuses on how Core Strategies (including policies or proposals maps) present policies for higher order designated biodiversity sites and adapt to the concept of holistic landscape scale habitat management and connectivity outside key designated sites. Table 2 sets out the framework of plan questions applied to the study sample:

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<sup>5</sup> This report uses the term ‘**European Sites**’ to describe sites designated under the Habitats (1992) and Birds (1979) Directives as Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas. Consistent with UK policy, Ramsar sites are included within this categorisation to reflect equivalent protection afforded.



**Table 2:** Research Study Tests

<b>Vision, Strategy and Spatial Approach</b>
Does the plan set out a coherent, <b>strategic and spatial vision</b> for biodiversity?
Does the <b>proposals map</b> or do other maps identify the following features, and are there appropriate criteria-based policies in the plan? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• European and international sites (SPA, SAC and Ramsar)</li> <li>• National sites (SSSIs and NNRs)</li> <li>• Nature Improvement Areas</li> <li>• Local Sites</li> <li>• Priority habitats and species outside designated sites</li> <li>• Green infrastructure and ecological networks</li> <li>• Habitat restoration and enhancement opportunities</li> </ul>
<b>Designated Sites</b>
Does the Plan highlight the importance of <b>protecting and enhancing internationally, nationally and locally important sites</b> ?
Does the Plan give <b>the highest level of protection</b> to sites of international nature conservation importance?
Does the Plan give a high priority to <b>reducing impacts on designated sites</b> by reducing impacts from surrounding areas?
Does it offer guidance on <b>development restrictions</b> that may apply to these areas?
Does it identify any cross-boundary issues and how these are to be addressed?
<b>Ecological Networks</b>
Is there a policy to <b>create and strengthen ecological networks</b> , to meet Biodiversity 2020 targets?
Is the plan specific about the <b>types of actions required</b> to establish and/or strengthen ecological networks?
Does the Plan require <b>habitat management plans</b> through planning conditions for particular development types, such as renewable energy?
<b>Priority Species and Habitats</b>
Does the Plan <b>specify actions to promote the preservation, restoration and re-creation of priority habitats</b> , and the protection and recovery of priority species populations?
Does the Plan contain specific policies that will contribute to the <b>conservation and enhancement of species populations in the wider environment</b> in order to help deliver the overall objectives of the Birds and Habitats Directives?
Does the Plan <b>outline the legislative background</b> to species protection and highlight developer requirements to conform to species protection provision or use planning obligations/conditions to secure protection?

Does the Plan have policies that would enable local planning authorities to secure the <b>long-term maintenance of sites that were created following the granting of planning permission</b> , either as mitigation/ enhancement, or as additional new sites?
Does the Plan refer to <b>management plans for all publicly owned sites</b> supporting priority habitats and species, working with Natural England?
<b>Green Infrastructure</b>
Does the Plan have a <b>Green Infrastructure strategy</b> ?
Does the Plan contain policies for <b>Local Green Spaces</b> ?
Does the Plan include <b>Natural England's Accessible Natural Green Space Standards</b> or set a higher local standard?
Are there policies that require <b>biodiversity to be designed into the built environment</b> , e.g. for a strategic site or in new development to provide space for species that nest or roost in the built environment?
<b>Other Observations</b>
Does the plan refer to <b>Local Nature Partnerships</b> ?
What <b>other document(s)</b> relevant to biodiversity planning does the local plan refer to?

- 3.2.5 A standard pro-forma was used to systematically record the outcomes of the test framework against each of the sample Core Strategies (and as appropriate accompanying development plan documents). Because of the volume of material, the completed pro-formas or record sheets are set out as a separate appendix.

### 3.3 Limitations and Difficulties Encountered

- 3.3.1 The pro-forma included a 'yes/no' element as well as more substantive 'comments' record. It was found through extensive application of the framework that simple 'yes/no' responses were sometimes difficult to establish. This was primarily as a consequence of the completeness of overall development plan preparation (in its legal sense, i.e. consisting of multiple DPDs) and the extent to which Core Strategies in isolation would be likely to reveal overall compliance with the NPPF.
- 3.3.2 Whilst the study is, by design and intent, focused upon *strategic* expressions of policy, other tests were more focused. Considerable flexibility exists in how LPAs can structure their development plan portfolios and the research has been carried out during a particularly active period of development plan evolution. This has resulted in two frequent and closely related difficulties arising in drawing robust assessments or a summary view of the overall effectiveness and scope of each plan in relation to the NPPF's principles for the natural environment.

- 3.3.3 Firstly, as a general consequence of the delays experienced in adapting to 'new' development plan processes and the NPPF's policy context, virtually all the LPAs for the plans reviewed were commencing preparation of secondary DPDs. Most commonly these would be Site Allocation DPDs and Development Management Policy DPDs. In other, less common instances, Area Action Plans (or equivalent area-specific DPDs) are being prepared. As a consequence of the study sample examining relatively recently adopted Core Strategies, it is logical that those second phase DPDs were found invariably to be at early stages of preparation and, at best, presented preliminary, untested content (where available) of limited value to the focus of this study. Hence, in terms of post-NPPF policy outputs, 'development plans' remain widely incomplete.
- 3.3.4 Secondly, a considerable variation in the extent of 'saved' Local Plan and Unitary Development Plan policy was noted across the study sample. Detailed, saved criteria-specific policy (often reflected by specific geographic expression on the saved elements of Proposals Maps) has been retained across many of the sample plans, but not for all. We also found little consistency in which policies had been saved and consequently the complexity of development plans content is high. In relation to the main focus of this study this may be less important because by definition, saved policies are pre-NPPF and their retention does not reflect in any way the LPA's approach to integrating its policies into the emerging development plan. It does however further complicate the ability to draw strong conclusions as to the implementation of the NPPF policy for biodiversity in new local plans.
- 3.3.5 It is important therefore to view the wider findings of this study as a 'snapshot' at a time when the content and effect of post-NPPF development plans is rapidly emerging. Until a comprehensive set of DPDs are adopted within each plan area, conclusions in respect to integration and adaptation of its full provisions should be qualified. Nevertheless, it has been possible to take an overview as to how well LPAs are planning for biodiversity strategically in Core Strategies.

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## 4. Summary of the NPPF's Policy for Biodiversity

- 4.1 This section briefly reiterates the principal elements of the NPPF that this study seeks to test the application of in emerging Local Plans. The scope of the study in respect to the elements of the NPPF to be examined was set by the project team.
- 4.2 Relevant biodiversity policies of the NPPF are contained in paragraphs 113-114 and 117-119. Content at 157 and 165 are also pertinent. However, the particular focus of the research is on the policies which require local plans to create, enhance and manage networks of biodiversity and Green Infrastructure (GI), which are presented at NPPF paragraphs 114 (1st bullet) and 117 (bullets 1-3 and 5) and on the policies to protect Natura 2000 sites and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (NPPF paragraphs 113, 118 2nd and 6th bullets, and 119). These are set out in Table 3:

**Table 3:** NPPF Core Research Policies

NPPF Paragraph	Pertinent Content
<b>NPPF 113 (Designated Sites)</b>	Local planning authorities should set criteria based policies against which proposals for any development on or affecting protected wildlife or geodiversity sites or landscape areas will be judged. Distinctions should be made between the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites so that protection is commensurate with their status and gives appropriate weight to their importance and the contribution that they make to wider ecological networks.
<b>NPPF 114 (Habitat Networks and Green Infrastructure).</b>	Local planning authorities should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• set out a strategic approach in their Local Plans, planning positively for the creation, protection, enhancement and management of networks of biodiversity and green infrastructure; and</li> <li>• maintain the character of the undeveloped coast, protecting and enhancing its distinctive landscapes, particularly in areas defined as Heritage Coast, and improve public access to and enjoyment of the coast.</li> </ul>
<b>NPPF 117 (Landscape-Scale Biodiversity Planning).</b>	To minimise impacts on biodiversity and geodiversity, planning policies should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan for biodiversity at a landscape-scale across local authority boundaries;</li> <li>• Identify and map components of the local ecological networks, including the hierarchy of international,</li> </ul>

	<p>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;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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;</li> <li>• Aim to prevent harm to geological conservation interests; <i>and</i></li> <li>• Where Nature Improvement Areas are identified in Local Plans, consider specifying the types of development that may be appropriate in these areas.</li> </ul>
<b>NPPF 118 (General Approach to Harm to Biodiversity Assets)</b>	<p>When determining planning applications, local planning authorities should aim to conserve and enhance biodiversity by applying the following principles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• if significant harm resulting from a development cannot be avoided (through locating on an alternative site with less harmful impacts), adequately mitigated, or, as a last resort, compensated for, then planning permission should be refused;</li> <li>• proposed development on land within or outside a Site of Special Scientific Interest likely to have an adverse effect on a Site of Special Scientific Interest (either individually or in combination with other developments) should not normally be permitted. Where an adverse effect on the site's notified special interest features is likely, an exception should only be made where the benefits of the development, at this site, clearly outweigh both the impacts that it is likely to have on the features of the site that make it of special scientific interest and any broader impacts on the national network of Sites of Special Scientific Interest;</li> <li>• development proposals where the primary objective is to conserve or enhance biodiversity should be permitted;</li> <li>• opportunities to incorporate biodiversity in and around developments should be encouraged;</li> <li>• planning permission should be refused for</li> </ul>

	<p>development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats, including ancient woodland and the loss of aged or veteran trees found outside ancient woodland, unless the need for, and benefits of, the development in that location clearly outweigh the loss; and</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the following wildlife sites should be given the same protection as European sites: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>potential Special Protection Areas and possible Special Areas of Conservation;</li> <li>listed or proposed Ramsar sites; and</li> <li>sites identified, or required, as compensatory measures for adverse effects on European sites, potential Special Protection Areas, possible Special Areas of Conservation, and listed or proposed Ramsar sites.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>NPPF 119 (Exceptions to Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development).</b>	The presumption in favour of sustainable development (paragraph 14) does not apply where development requiring appropriate assessment under the Birds or Habitats Directives is being considered, planned or determined.
<b>NPPF 157 (Scope and key elements of the Local Plan)</b>	<p>Crucially, Local Plans should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contain a clear strategy for enhancing the natural, built and historic environment, and supporting Nature Improvement Areas where they have been identified.</li> </ul>
<b>NPPF 165 (Using a Proportionate Evidence Base – Environment)</b>	Planning policies and decisions should be based on up-to-date information about the natural environment and other characteristics of the area including drawing, for example, from River Basin Management Plans. Working with Local Nature Partnerships where appropriate, this should include an assessment of existing and potential components of ecological networks.

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## 5. Analysis and Findings

- 5.1 This section presents a summary analysis of the findings of the research for the 30 Core Strategies.
- 5.2 Analysis is primarily presented as descriptive narrative such that observed compliance or divergence from the NPPF's policies is described in relation to individual or related groups of the tests established within the Research Study Tests Framework (Table 2). Simple quantitative findings are set out as general indicators of the extent of observed adoption of the NPPF's policies, but these should not be considered as statistically significant.
- 5.3 The findings present a significantly mixed picture for successful adaptation of the NPPF's policies within Core Strategies with significant scope for improvement being observed. However, where good practice in strategic planning for biodiversity has been identified these are set out as *Good Practice Examples*. These examples are not exclusive.

### 5.1 Vision, Strategy and Spatial Approach

- 5.1.1 The Research Study Tests Framework sought to ask:

*Does the plan set out a coherent, strategic and spatial vision for biodiversity?*

#### Overview

- 5.1.2 **Less than one third** of Core Strategies present a clear strategic approach to planning for biodiversity where the distribution of development is positively influenced by wildlife considerations and there is coherent planning for biodiversity at a landscape scale. For **more than a third** of Core Strategies there was no convincing evidence of biodiversity being a core determinant of overall spatial strategy. **NPPF policy for biodiversity planning at a landscape scale has not been widely embedded in Core Strategies.**
- 5.1.3 This issue is at the heart of whether the new generation of strategic spatial plans reflect fully the integrated principles of sustainable development. It also offers the most obvious point to demonstrate whether plans have embedded within their core *spatial strategy* components a positive and integrated approach to biodiversity - that they should address biodiversity conservation and enhancement objectives at a strategic level and preferably at a landscape scale. This section considers the influence of biodiversity in

setting a strategic spatial strategy for the whole plan, before examining whether specific and coherent spatial strategy for biodiversity is being embedded within Core Strategies.

- 5.1.4 All plans examined were structured in broadly similar ways, although some variation was noted, particularly in respect to the sequence in which strategic allocations / growth priorities and topic specific policies were listed (such as Biodiversity and Green Infrastructure). Core Strategies invariably set out an initial series of strategic issues, a plan area profile or 'portrait', identified challenges for the plan period and core objectives for the plan to meet. In most instances, plan area portraits would set out clear reference to local environmental characteristics and assets including biodiversity assets, particularly designated sites and landscape features. Spatial portraits would tend to present these assets in a promotional sense, as being highly valued by the community, offering local distinctiveness and increasing the attractiveness for investment. Higher tier biodiversity designations and designated landscapes would generally be recognised as being influential in the future planning of the area. However, strategic objectives were found usually to have evolved to some degree from Sustainable Community Strategies. In doing so natural environment issues would not always enjoy a high profile, particularly in areas characterised by economic and social challenges.
- 5.1.5 Arising from these contextual elements, a Vision Statement and subsequent Strategic Aims or Objectives would be set out. By definition and in the spirit of the NPPF the Vision Statement would be presented as a snapshot of plan area characteristics at the end of the plan period. Whilst these might be expected to be aspirational, the plan sample was found to present relatively standard statements to the effect of *'the community will be able to enjoy and access a rich and diverse natural environment'* with multiple variations on that theme observed. Examples of more specific and positive vision extracts were noted however.

Good Practice Example:

*'Vision'*

**Cannock Chase Local Plan**

Vision includes specific aspirational biodiversity outcomes...

*'There will be a 'green corridor' of restored lowland heathland habitat linking the Cannock Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty to Sutton Park'.*

**Nottingham City Local Plan***In 2028...*

*'..The area's unique built and natural environment has been improved through the sensitive and high quality design of new development. Major new Green Infrastructure has enhanced the multifunctional open space provision and network of green corridors linking the built up areas to open countryside and has helped to address the impacts of that growth whilst also providing opportunities for healthy lifestyles...and contributed to a step change increase in the region's biodiversity whilst allowing it to cope with climate change.'*

- 5.1.6 In some instances, the natural environment and its component features were not referred to explicitly within the Vision Statement.
- 5.1.7 Invariably, Strategic Aims or Objectives arising from the stated challenges and Vision would make reference to the need and desire to seek to conserve and enhance wildlife/biodiversity/natural assets across the plan area. Plans were commonly also found to acknowledge the value of protection and enhancement of biodiversity, habitats and connectivity beyond designated sites and commonly presented such objectives in combination with Green Infrastructure principles. However, despite good contextual reference to wildlife and habitats, such aspirations were not usually then found to be reflected in clear and explicit strategic spatial policy for biodiversity.
- 5.1.8 The degree to which biodiversity and green infrastructure considerations influenced the *spatial strategy* (i.e. the planned, location-specific distribution of growth and infrastructure - a fundamental component of Core Strategies), was however significantly limited. **Less than one third of the sample plans** were identified as having a coherent spatial strategy *for biodiversity* (specifically), but even within this range, the influence on the plans' spatial strategies by biodiversity assets, designations and opportunities for enhancement/reconnection was highly limited. The most influential and frequent considerations in shaping spatial strategy across the sample plan areas were meeting needs for housing and employment space, along with existing settlement distribution, settlement scale and hierarchy and the presence of previously developed sites. Principles of sustainable development were found to be influential in justifying focused growth, such as for Strategic Urban Extensions (SUE) as a vehicle for securing delivery of mixed-use, housing, employment, infrastructure and social facilities supported by comprehensive development schemes. Within such sites, Green Infrastructure (with habitats being a component part), would frequently be highlighted as a key aspirational deliverable, with localised links to wider networks, but this could be viewed as an opportunity arising from SUEs rather than a driving influence of spatial strategy.

- 5.1.9 Biodiversity and natural environmental considerations were not ordinarily key drivers of spatial strategy within the Core Strategies reviewed. Examples of how this was partially achieved were found as exceptions to this core finding.

Good Practice Example:

*Spatial Strategy*

**Rother District Local Plan**

The plan's expression of 'Main Issues' includes identification of the impact of biodiversity designations on the plan's strategy. It highlights that stringent international and national obligations upon how land is used affects the plan's approach. Accommodating growth whilst ensuring that this does not conflict with the unique wildlife and habitats protected is particularly challenging.

- 5.1.10 However, this finding is not to say that environmental constraints and opportunities were not given due regard in refining the spatial strategies, they were just not fundamental drivers in most cases. Where environmental constraints or opportunities presented themselves, particularly in close proximity to main settlements, spatial strategy would be seen to acknowledge need for constraint, or more frequently the integration of mitigation measures to avoid harm being caused on recognised assets. In particular European sites, such as **Cannock Chase**, and the **Thames Estuary and Marshes** were found to be influential in shaping localised distribution, the character of growth and in setting out at a strategic level that growth within defined areas would only be acceptable if mitigation could be delivered so as to protect the integrity of those higher tier sites. Our research suggests that biodiversity considerations play an important role in localised spatial principles and policy, but infrequently influence spatial strategy at the plan area scale (or across boundaries).
- 5.1.11 In respect to more focused, specific and coherent strategic vision and strategies for biodiversity, the study found a significant variation across the sample plans, although spatially expressed planning policy for biodiversity remains the exception in adopted Core Strategies. Cross-boundary and true landscape-scale planning policy for biodiversity was rarely identified with only a few exceptions.
- 5.1.12 At the strategic plan level the research found that reference to detailed biodiversity policy was frequently deferred to other issue-specific strategies, such as Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs). Core Strategies would explicitly set out actions and priorities of LBAPs only exceptionally, with reference commonly made to a general support for such priorities in exercising planning functions, but with no specificity.

Good Practice Example:

*Strategic Approach to Biodiversity*

**Broadland, Norwich and South Norfolk Joint Core Strategy**

From the outset the plan recognises environmental constraints and opportunities and establishes objectives to minimise adverse impact. The plan recognises the potential for new development to positively contribute to enhancing the environmental network.

Sub-regional mapping presents extensive areas for biodiversity core areas, buffer zones for fragmented habitats and priority areas for extending and linking fragmented habitats. It provides spatial expression and locally specific policy objectives for biodiversity.

## 5.2 Proposals Map and Spatial Expression of Policy Application

5.2.1 The Research Study Tests Framework sought to ask:

***Does the Proposals Map or do other maps identify the following features, and are there appropriate criteria-based policies in the plan?***

- *European and international sites (SPA, SAC and Ramsar)*
- *National Sites (SSSIs and NNRs)*
- *Nature Improvement Areas*
- *Local Sites*
- *Priority habitats and species outside designated sites*
- *Green infrastructure and ecological networks*
- *Habitat restoration and enhancement opportunities*

### Overview

- 5.2.2 *Where they occur*, internationally and nationally designated biodiversity sites were found to be illustrated in almost **90%** of Core Strategies appraised, either diagrammatically or in (relative) detail within the mapped elements. Locally designated sites were **not generally shown** within Core Strategies but commonly retained as mapped elements of saved plan proposals maps. Some components of Green Infrastructure and ecological networks were noted in over **70%** of the plans, but the detail and scope of these varied markedly. Conversely Priority Habitats were found to be mapped in **less than 5%** of the sample. **Less than 20%** of plans illustrated habitats restoration priorities in Core Strategies. Where Nature Improvement Areas are established only half of Core Strategies map these.
- 5.2.3 Differentiation in policy criteria for the consideration of internationally, nationally and locally designated sites is often weak with many plans referring generally to the protection and enhancement of designated sites.
- 5.2.4 The diagrammatic or cartographic expression of biodiversity related policies and the indication of specific environmental designations, habitats and natural features was found to vary considerably across the plan sample.
- 5.2.5 Predictably, the extent, type and status of biodiversity assets vary across the plans, and this in turn influences the assets mapped. **Table 4** reflects the distribution and general status of designated sites across the study sample. However, this alone cannot be considered to explain the degree of difference identified as all plans did include some degree of spatially defined natural environment policies (such as for Green Infrastructure). Variation occurred in several different respects, but primarily in the level of detail 'mapped' - within Core Strategy documents themselves, or set out in *Policy Maps* or *Saved Proposal Maps*, and the scope of biodiversity/GI subject matter included therein.
- 5.2.6 Whilst the Development Plan Regulations require the preparation of a 'Policies Map' as part of the statutory development plan, expressing policy application spatially, the significant majority of the study's sample plans had no up-to-date policies map published. Examples of up-to-date policies maps were observed, such as at **Christchurch & East Dorset, Cannock Chase and Gravesham**, but these were in a significant minority. Where policies maps were not presented it was noted within Development Plan Schemes that these would come forward particularly in combination with Site Allocations DPDs. Within these, detailed application of strategic policy would be applied at the local level, particularly for housing and employment allocations, but also for matters such as Green Infrastructure networks and core components of the natural environment.



Table 4: Protected Areas within the Study Sample Local Authorities

LPA	Region	Inter - national Sites	National Sites	Local Sites
Allerdale District Council	NW	Y	Y	Y
Broadland, Norwich & South Norfolk	EoE	Y	Y	Y
Broxtowe Borough Council	EM	-	Y	Y
Cannock Chase District Council-	WM	Y	Y	Y
Christchurch and East Dorset	SW	Y	Y	Y
Croydon, London Borough of	London		Y	Y
Eastbourne Borough Council	SE	-	Y	Y
Fenland District Council	EoE	Y	Y	Y
Gedling Borough Council	EM	-	Y	Y
Gravesham Borough Council	SE	Y	Y	Y
Greenwich, Royal Borough of	London	-	Y	Y
Hertsmere Borough Council	EoE	-	Y	Y
Knowsley Borough Council	NW	-	-	Y
Leeds City Council	Y&H	Y	Y	Y
North Warwickshire Borough Council	WM	-	Y	Y
Northampton Borough Council	EM	Y	Y	Y
Nottingham City Council	EM	-	Y	Y
Ribble Valley Borough Council	NW	Y	Y	Y
Richmondshire District Council	Y&H	Y	Y	Y
Rother District Council	SE	Y	Y	Y
Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council	Y&H	-	Y	Y
Ryedale District Council	Y&H	Y	Y	Y
Selby District Council	Y&H	Y	Y	Y
Shepway District Council	SE	Y	Y	Y
Stafford Borough Council	WM	Y	Y	Y
Staffordshire Moorlands District Council	WM	Y	Y	Y
Suffolk Coastal District Council	EoE	Y	Y	Y
Westminster London Borough	London	-	-	Y
West Lancashire District Council	NW	Y	Y	Y
Winchester	SE	Y	Y	Y
<b>Totals (30)</b>		<b>19</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>30</b>

5.2.7 In the absence of up-to-date Policies Maps, cartographic or diagrammatic expression of policy coverage for biodiversity is sometimes deferred to maps and diagrams within the Core Strategies or referred to saved Proposals Maps. Within Core Strategies themselves, Key Diagrams varied considerably in relation to biodiversity sites and green infrastructure identification (as well as other planning matters). This reflects the priority afforded to biodiversity in

driving and shaping overall plan spatial strategy as examined at part 5.1. Where plan areas included European or Ramsar designations these would be commonly expressed diagrammatically on the key diagram but SSSIs would normally not be indicated on key diagrams. However, such filters were not universally consistent. For most plans where international sites are not found, no biodiversity or natural environment sites or features would be indicated on the Key Diagram.

- 5.2.8 Whether or not the Key Diagram presented biodiversity information, in most examples Core Strategies would include diagrams or maps within topic-specific elements of the plan, reflecting elements of the spatial strategy. For example, **Selby Core Strategy** 'Map 8' sets out all locally designated wildlife sites. Where strategic development sites are presented within Core Strategies, maps or plans showing indicative areas and components of the proposals would frequently indicate either environmental constraints, and/or opportunities for habitat and green infrastructure/habitat network provision in the context of the strategic outlook for the site.
- 5.2.9 Core Strategy chapters for the natural environment, or equivalent terminology, would in most cases present some diagrammatic expression of biodiversity and Green Infrastructure sites and components. However the level of detail set out within these was predominantly indicative or generalised. Strategic or schematic indication of biodiversity assets and opportunities may be appropriate in relation to Core Strategies alone, reflecting their purpose as strategic plan elements, but inadequate - particularly in relation to designated sites and (occasionally zones of constraint/buffers) for reference in development management processes.
- 5.2.10 Whether clearly identified within the plan or not, *saved* elements of the proposals maps are frequently deferred to as a source of identification of designated sites' detailed boundaries. However, signposting of this was often obscure or *de facto*, potentially future-proofing the core strategy for when site allocations DPDs are adopted. This presents an inherent risk of obsolescence with sites being added to or removed from designated status over time. In terms of 'usability' such cross-reference can be cumbersome and does not help ease-of-use and understanding of the plan.
- 5.2.11 Where the study sample plans did include biodiversity related mapping elements these would frequently be limited to upper tier designations only (European sites, SSSIs, NNRs). Locally designated sites, such as Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) were indicated upon saved proposals maps, such as at **Hertsmere**, or (as previously noted) bundled into a homogenous group of 'nature conservation sites' or simply as areas of 'green infrastructure', such as for the **Leeds** Core Strategy. Despite the variation in approach and usability of biodiversity mapping in Core Strategies, about **two thirds** of plans

appraised did include some expression of designated wildlife sites at all levels, such as at **Christchurch & East Dorset** and **Gravesham**.

- 5.2.12 Nature Improvement Areas (as established within 6 of the sample plans) were inconsistently presented visually. For example within the **Rotherham** Core Strategy the Dearne Valley NIA is set out on a specific regional biodiversity map, but within **Northampton** no spatial expression of the area was presented. Purbeck NIA is indicated within the **Christchurch & East Dorset** plan at very small scale and schematically only, effectively presenting very limited spatial guidance. Three of the six NIAs were not mapped within their respective Core Strategies.
- 5.2.13 Priority habitats and species outside designated sites were not mapped as specific entities in over 90% of the sample. Only **Knowsley Core Strategy** was found to do so. This most likely reflects their fragmented nature and often small spatial areas. Through examination of policies and supporting text such areas would frequently be embraced within broad aspirational policy concepts such as strategic Green Infrastructure enhancement areas or areas for habitat re-connection such as within the **Broadland, Norwich and South Norfolk Joint Core Strategy**. Elsewhere examples were noted where specific habitat enhancements were explicitly supported by the plan but not expressed necessarily as Priority Habitats objectives, for example within **Northampton Core Strategy** where areas for '*woodland creation and enhancement*' are positively identified.
- 5.2.14 Green Infrastructure at its broadest and generalised sense, embracing implicit related habitat restoration and creation opportunities were presented graphically within a majority of the sample plans, reflecting a broad adoption of the concept of multi-functionality of 'natural' and green spaces as a coherent network. However, for a significant majority of plans such representation was diagrammatic rather than detailed mapping. Moreover, there was significant variation in the perceived extent and ambition in relation to identifying spatial Green Infrastructure networks, including recognition of how these related to sites or features outside the plan area. Where Core Strategies presented indicative masterplans for targeted areas of growth – often as settlement extensions or brownfield site redevelopment proposals, Green Infrastructure corridors or other key environmental components would be shown on area-specific plans or on Policies Maps. These would also tend to indicate locally identified habitat connectivity aspirations, for example linking new neighbourhoods to riverside environments or other green corridors.

Good Practice Example:  
*Green Infrastructure Mapping*

**Shepway Core Strategy**

Figure 5.3 in the Core Strategy presents indicative/diagrammatic Green Infrastructure layers, including specific strategic Green Infrastructure opportunities. These include: green routes; ecological corridors; Biodiversity Opportunity Areas; and important development sites where GI will be delivered.

**Cannock Chase Core Strategy**

Diagram 4.7 presents strategic expression of Green Infrastructure opportunities and priorities. It identifies internal and cross boundary strategic green links and areas for focus on landscape and biodiversity enhancement and conservation.

- 5.2.15 Absence of mapping expression of Green infrastructure and habitat connectivity and enhancement was not necessarily an indication of policy or strategy absence. For example no Green Infrastructure mapping for **Ryedale** was noted within the Core Strategy but strong Green Infrastructure and habitat network policy (including ecosystems services reference) presenting strong protection and network expansion objectives, was established at Policy SP15. This policy sets out a series of sub-areas/natural features / existing infrastructure types within the plan area where GI protection and enhancement will be paramount.
- 5.2.16 In summary, the mapped expression of Core Strategy policy was found to be highly variable in terms of: the location within the 'Development Plan' document suite; policy scope; specificity and detail; profile and position within the Core Strategy document; whether set out as 'new' up-to-date mapping or as *saved* proposals map content; and whether deferred to other documents (such as GI Strategies). This inconsistency and general incompleteness in strategic mapping may reflect the stage of the development plan suite preparation that most of the study sample LPAs had reached at the time of study.
- 5.2.17 Whilst some good examples were identified, it is reasonable to conclude that general standards of mapping for Core Strategies is not adequate to guide development decisions or properly inform plan users. It remains to be seen over relatively short periods of time from the date of this report whether policies mapping is expanded and the spatial expression of policy significantly improved as development of site-specific DPDs progresses.

### 5.3 Designated Sites

#### 5.3.1 The Research Study Tests Framework sought to ask:

*Does the Plan highlight the importance of protecting and enhancing internationally, nationally and locally important sites?*

*Does the Plan give the highest level of protection to sites of international nature conservation importance?*

*Does the Plan give a high priority to reducing impacts on designated sites by reducing impacts from surrounding areas?*

*Does it offer guidance on development restrictions that may apply to these areas?*

*Does it identify any cross-boundary issues and how these are to be addressed?*

#### Overview

5.3.2 The study found that **all plans** studied set out an explicit position in policy or text in relation to the need to protect and enhance designated biodiversity sites, although the specificity and value afforded by plans varied considerably. Where international sites are located within the plan area, their relative status and legal standing was identified in **over 80%** of relevant plans.

5.3.3 The research found that policy for reducing the impact on designated sites from surrounding areas was much less established with **less than two thirds** of plans effectively or partially seeking to manage impacts on sites from outside. **Less than 20%** of plans set overtly restrictive approaches to development in areas that may have indirect impacts upon designated biodiversity sites. **Only 20%** of Core Strategies reasonably clearly identifying the need to manage cross-boundary biodiversity matters through the planning system.

5.3.4 A very high proportion of the sample plans were found to include policy-based *protection* from harmful development to designated nature conservation sites, although the detail and structure of those policies vary and an explicit differentiation according to the hierarchy of designated sites was often absent.

5.3.5 The principle for designated site protection significantly pre-dates NPPF and in most instances would have been embedded in previous plan iterations, and in many cases are still retained as detailed 'saved' Local Plan policy for

Development Management purposes. Whilst the sample plans were found to universally present a strategic level policy pertaining to the protection of designated sites, these almost always take one of two observed approaches.

- 5.3.6 Firstly, within overarching policy for the natural environment (or even Green Infrastructure more generally) a significant proportion of plans would simply state that development which would harm a site designated for nature conservation importance would *not be permitted*. In most cases, such policy statements would cross-refer to national policy and relevant legislation for the various levels of protection appropriate, commensurate to designation status. In other, fewer plans, national and international policy and legislation would be set out or paraphrased within policy affording more direct and accessible guidance, but in actuality adding very little in terms of local interpretation or application to levels of protection established in law and national policy.
- 5.3.7 In virtually all sample plans, the principles of protecting designated sites (within the context of nature conservation overall) was supplemented with reference to *enhancement* or *management*. However, detail in terms of enhancement measures and expectations were weakly expressed (see section 5.4 below).
- 5.3.8 Significant differences in the degree to which designated sites were identified and policy set out reflected sites' existence and distribution across plan areas. Hence, where no European sites are located within the plan area, policy would not be presented for such sites apart from where neighbouring areas included international sites and Habitats Regulations Assessment had indicated potential for indirect significant effects arising from the plan's implementation.

Good Practice Example:

*Indirect Effects on International Sites*

#### **Leeds Core Strategy**

The Plan makes specific reference *in policy* to avoiding indirect effects arising from development on the South Pennine Moors SAC and SPA although this falls outside the plan area.

Policy 1 states:-

*'In meeting the needs of housing and economic development (and in reflecting the conclusions of the Appropriate Assessment Screening), to seek to meet development requirements, without adverse nature conservation impacts upon Special Protection Areas and Special Areas of Conservation, in particular the South Pennine Moors (including Hawksworth Moor).'*



- 5.3.9 Examination of how plans' proposals and strategies were shaped by the presence of designated sites is addressed in section 5.1. The test framework also examined whether and how Core Strategies foster the integrity and condition of designated sites by influencing development patterns, levels and character in relative proximity to them. The research clearly found that such guidance or policy prescription was vague or absent from plans, or at best dispersed widely across supporting text, for example in relation to specific growth or regeneration sites. This reflects an absence of specific policies or policy criteria for the consideration of indirect effects from development (particularly below international site level). In most instances therefore the common approach set within policy seeking the protection of the integrity of designated sites presented appropriate headline intent, but inadequate guidance or local specificity.
- 5.3.10 Good practice examples which take a more pro-active approach to indirect effects were identified however, particularly in respect to European sites. Whilst the legislative weight behind the protection of European sites can be seen to drive best practice examples, they also suggest that principles could be 'rolled-out' in respect to SSSIs and National Nature Reserves more widely than was evidenced.
- 5.3.11 The research found that Core Strategies with internationally designated sites within the plan area or adjacent plan areas tend simply to make reference to consideration of the need to provide mitigation measures in relation to development where the potential for harm may arise. Specificity in the type of actions which would effectively meet policy expectations is highly limited.

Good Practice Example:

*Indirect Effects on European Sites*

#### **Cannock Chase and Stafford Borough Core Strategies**

These neighbouring plans embed principles of buffer zones and Suitable Alternative Natural Green Spaces (SANGS) provision within policy to avoid potential recreation pressure impacts on the Cannock Chase SAC and reflected the spatial extent of these policy applications on the Policies Maps.

#### **Nottingham City Core Strategy**

The Core Strategy's *Infrastructure Delivery Plan* includes expectation for the provision through planning decisions of *precautionary* mitigation measures to ensure no adverse indirect affects from growth across the plan area on the prospective SPA designation in adjacent Sherwood Forest.

- 5.3.12 Where Core Strategies promote specific growth points and related strategic allocations, it was found that area-specific prescription of where and how Green Infrastructure should be provided as mitigation measures for reducing direct and indirect harm potentially arising was set out more widely than for the general principle as examined above.

Good Practice Example:

*Precautionary Approach to Effects on European Sites*

#### **Gravesham Core Strategy**

Gravesend Riverside East and North East Gravesend Opportunity Area policy identifies a decline in bird populations within the SPA and Ramsar site although there is insufficient evidence to determine causes. The plan therefore takes a precautionary approach and requires developers to provide or contribute to mitigation measures for the recreation needs arising from their developments, which may include provision of alternative greenspace, contributions to visitor control mechanisms and/or management of the SPAs, to ensure that detrimental impacts on the integrity of the SPAs/Ramsar sites are avoided.

## **5.4 Ecological Networks**

- 5.4.1 The Research Study Tests Framework sought to ask:

*Is there a policy to create and strengthen ecological networks, to meet Biodiversity 2020 targets?*

*Is the plan specific about the types of actions required to establish and/or strengthen ecological networks?*

*Does the Plan require habitat management plans through planning conditions for particular development types, such as renewable energy?*

#### **Overview**

- 5.4.2 **Around 75%** of plans include general **policy or strategic statements** in relation to wider biodiversity enhancements and habitat connectivity, de-fragmentation of wildlife corridors, achieving LBAP objectives and securing net gain in biodiversity over the plan period. The study found that **very few** core strategies expressed **clear spatial structures** for this or made specific reference to Biodiversity 2020.

- 5.4.3 Conversely, Core Strategies are less robust in setting out what specific measures or actions delivered through the planning system are required to realise those ecological network aspirations, with **around 50%** of the sample going some way to present these.
- 5.4.4 Core Strategies were not found to set out policy frameworks which require habitat management plans in relation to specific development types.
- 5.4.5 Direct and specific reference to the targets and actions set out in *Biodiversity 2020* was minimal. The only explicit reference to Biodiversity 2020 set within plan text proper (as oppose to general listing of background references) was in the **Hertsmere Core Strategy** where its states its aims and objectives are *consistent* with Biodiversity 2020. Even here, no targets for delivery of specific habitat types and amounts to reflect the strategy were set out.
- 5.4.6 The infrequent reference to *Biodiversity 2020* however masks widely established strategic aspirations, objectives and policy across sample plans explicitly supporting a strengthening of ecological networks across the plan areas (outside and between designated sites). In most instances clear positive strategic policy *intent* is embedded within either specific policy for biodiversity / nature conservation, but there is also significant overlap and/or symbiotic relationships with Green Infrastructure policy and spatial strategy. Recognition of multifunctional benefits pertaining to climate change adaptation, flood management, recreation, public health, and landscape character improvements were widely acknowledged as being closely related to positive habitat network enhancement.
- 5.4.7 Across the plan sample policy and supporting text was frequently found to highlight the importance of reconnecting green spaces and designated sites, and to reverse historic habitat fragmentation. However, in most plans, the context for Green Infrastructure and habitat network policy tend to acknowledge, defer and often rely upon priorities set out within national, regional (such as Yorkshire and the Humber) and Local Biodiversity Action Plans. Core strategies themselves were not found to specifically set out these guiding frameworks for the delivery of habitat network enhancement and reconnection.
- 5.4.8 Despite frequent policy context for positive action in relation to strategic habitat networks and landscape permeability to wildlife, prescription within the sample plans of the specific actions or priorities to facilitate achievement of these objectives is much less well established. As noted, where Core Strategies present localised area-specific policy, such as for Strategic Urban Extensions, more specific habitat related actions were identified within policy

or supporting text. These exceptions, however valid and beneficial, do not adequately reflect or significantly further strategic objectives for *landscape scale* habitat reconnection, management and enhancement in Core Strategies. Reliance upon detail set out in other non-planning documents or strategies does not benefit from the status of development plan policy.

- 5.4.9 The sample plans overall present a positive headline approach to possibly the most aspirational and value-added element of the NPPF's policies for biodiversity – *landscape scale* biodiversity management. Strategic intent and overview policy frameworks for enhancing the biodiversity value of plan areas outside designated sites, and particularly within identified wildlife corridors and networks, are becoming established in recent plans. Much good evidence-base work and habitat strategy development has been undertaken outside the immediate statutory planning context (such as cross-boundary Green Infrastructure Strategies) that Core Strategies were seen to reference but rarely embed more specific detail or guidance.
- 5.4.10 The specificity of actions required to achieve strategic aspirations for biodiversity however remain less developed in Core Strategies although strategic principles are often being established. Some good examples were however noted.

Good Practice Example:

*Positive biodiversity Objectives in Core Strategy*

#### **Ryedale Core Strategy**

The Core Strategy sets out a specific and overtly positive policy (SP14) for enhancement and biodiversity gain, addressing a number of non-spatial aspirations before listing as series of targeted 'landscape scale' investments/priorities to be fostered through the planning process, stating:

*'Investment in the conservation, restoration and enhancement of biodiversity in Ryedale will be targeted at...*

*The **landscape-scale** projects identified in the Yorkshire and Humber Biodiversity Delivery Plan which are wholly or partially within Ryedale:*

- *Howardian Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Western North York Moors Belt*
- *North York Moors Grassland Fringe*
- *Vale of Pickering*
- *West Wolds*
- *Lower Derwent Valley*
- *Yorkshire Peatlands*

*The habitats and species identified in the Ryedale Biodiversity Action Plan including those habitats which are particularly distinctive in the following areas:*

- *Ancient woodland in the Howardian Hills*
- *Species rich grassland, a traditional feature of strip fields around Ryedale's villages*
- *Marsh wetland in the Vale of Pickering*
- *Fen meadows in the Howardian Hills*
- *Limestone grassland in the Howardian Hills*
- *Floodplain swamps in the Derwent Floodplain and streamside swamps in the Howardian Hills and Wolds*
- *Chalk grassland on the Wolds*
- *Acid grassland at the foot of the Wolds; southern edge of the Vale of Pickering and Howardian Hills Limestone grassland in the Howardian Hills*
- *Ponds in the Vale of Pickering and at Flaxton*
- *Dry wooded valleys along the Fringe of the Moors*
- *Wet woodland in the Vales of Pickering and York; the Howardian Hills*
- *Wood pasture and Parkland associated with large country houses*
- *Heathland remnants in the Howardian Hills and southern Ryedale'.*

5.4.11 It will be important to monitor how the emergence of more site-specific 'second tier' DPDs will (as commonly stated within Core Strategies) interpret and express habitat network strategy at local area-specific levels.

5.4.12 None of the Core Strategies examined set explicit policy for delivery of Habitat Management Plans in relation to specific types of development, for example energy projects. However, as previously noted, plans frequently refer and defer to LBAPs or related biodiversity strategies for more detailed indication of targeted actions, and such reference could feasibly be contained therein. However, this would not carry the weight of development plan policy. All plans reviewed set out provisions for delivery of plan objectives and policy (implementation Plans/Strategy). These commonly afford the LPA the ability to require the provision of long-term management agreements across a range of issues, including public open space, green infrastructure and mitigation and compensatory works. However, such provisions would be available to LPAs whether explicitly set out in the Core Strategies or not.

## 5.5 Priority Species and Habitats

### 5.5.1 The Research Study Tests Framework sought to ask:

*Does the Plan specify actions to promote the preservation, restoration and re-creation of priority habitats, and the protection and recovery of priority species populations?*

*Does the Plan contain specific policies that will contribute to the conservation and enhancement of species populations in the wider environment in order to help deliver the overall objectives of the Birds and Habitats Directives?*

*Does the Plan outline the legislative background to species protection and highlight developer requirements to conform to species protection provision or use planning obligations/conditions to secure protection?*

*Does the Plan have policies that would enable local planning authorities to secure the long-term maintenance of sites that were created following the granting of planning permission, either as mitigation/enhancement, or as additional new sites?*

*Does the Plan refer to management plans for all publicly owned sites supporting priority habitats and species, working with Natural England?*

#### Overview

5.5.2 The study found that about **65%** of the sample Core Strategies set a positive or partial context for the preservation, restoration and re-creation of priority habitats, and the protection and recovery of priority species populations. However strategic policy and supporting text were not strongly backed-up with finer grain *policy* specificity.

5.5.3 **Over 75%** of Core Strategies set **some degree** of positive context for the conservation and enhancement of species populations outside designated sites. However, these were set at strategic level aspirations and did not explicitly relate to delivery of the overall objectives of the Birds and Habitats Directives, although such benefits would be likely to accrue.

5.5.4 Explicit reference to legislative background for biodiversity protection and obligations was found to be inconsistently set out in Core Strategies.



- 5.5.5 **Over 70%** of plans presented some degree of explicit indication that on-going management of habitats created through planning permissions may be required, although explicit policy would not be a precondition to such requirements *per se*.
- 5.5.6 **No** core strategies were found to explicitly refer to Management Plans of publicly owned sites supporting Priority Habitats or Species, whether or not working with Natural England.

- 5.5.7 The first and second tests developed in relation to Priority Species and Habitats align closely with the issues addressed within the previous tests (Ecological Networks). Consequently, whilst Core Strategies widely promoted a positive approach to landscape-scale habitat restoration and enhancement (i.e. embracing extensive tracts of land not designated for biodiversity importance) they were for the most part non-specific in terms of prescribing actions necessary and deliverable through the planning system to achieve these goals. Policies and supporting text did however, as highlighted previously, look to positively support the objectives of Biodiversity Action Plans and/or Green Infrastructure / strategic habitat initiatives – but infrequently set these out in policy specific criteria or objectives.

Good Practice Example:

*Biodiversity Enhancement Outside Designated Sites*

#### **Staffordshire Moorlands Core Strategy**

Policy NE1 of the Core Strategy sets out strong and multiple layers of biodiversity related policy. Key criteria components of the policy include:

*‘Ensuring development where appropriate produces a net gain in biodiversity, and ensuring that any unavoidable impacts are appropriately mitigated for.’*  
And;

*‘Ensuring development promotes the appropriate maintenance, enhancement, restoration and/or re-creation of biodiversity through its proposed nature, scale, location and design. The Staffordshire Moorlands Biodiversity Opportunity Map, in conjunction with the Staffordshire Biodiversity Action Plan, will be used to guide biodiversity enhancement measures to be included in development proposals as appropriate to the nature and scale of development proposed and other environmental interest, in particular supporting opportunities to increase grassland and heathland habitats including supporting targets in the UK and Staffordshire Biodiversity Action Plan’.*

- 5.5.8 Consistent with findings in relation to ‘*Biodiversity 2020*’, the research did not find examples of Core Strategies seeking to *explicitly* further the wider objectives of the Birds and Habitats Directives whereby Public bodies should be pro-active in the exercise of their functions to contribute to the preservation, enhancement and re-establishment of sufficient diversity and area of habitat for wild birds. However, this is not to say that the frameworks of strategic policies set out in the adopted plans would not help to do so, if indirectly. Specific profile for internationally designated sites is mostly well developed in Core Strategies, including in relation to indirect impacts. Specific biodiversity, habitat and green infrastructure policies and plan provisions in relation to strategic development proposals can, in combination, be seen to set a disjointed but potentially effective framework of expectations and aspirations which will (through the operation of the planning system) serve to benefit the Directives’ wider aspirations.
- 5.5.9 Pertinent to the delivery of legally established objectives for the natural environment, the research found that such legislation has been expressed or indirectly referred to within around half of the plans assessed to help overtly emphasise the importance and legal origins for establishing aspirational (and potentially restrictive) policies for biodiversity in a small proportion of plans. However, in half of the plans such cross-reference was absent or at best set out in supporting appendices presenting background references. The main exception to this was, predictably, reference to European Union Directives as (transposed) in relation to European sites, although the day-to-day value of such references may be open to debate. Reference to Local Authorities’ duty to conserve biodiversity under The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (NERC) was observed within four plans only **Christchurch & East Dorset, Rotherham, Selby and Stafford**.
- 5.5.10 However, whilst potentially missing an opportunity to explicitly state legislative support for positive plan strategy for biodiversity, failure to explicitly reference legislative frameworks for wildlife conservation need not be seen as a fundamental plan shortcoming. In not making reference to legislative context the plans are not disadvantaged or limited in respect to the scope or intent of policy for the natural environment set out therein. Any powers or delivery mechanisms made available to the LPA or its partners by law would remain available to the appropriate body whether set out in the plan or not.
- 5.5.11 The research found no plans where explicit policy was set out which expected Habitat Management Plans to be set in place to facilitate recovery of priority species or habitats through the planning system on publicly owned land, whether working with Natural England or independently. However, as previously noted, plans frequently refer and defer to LBAPs or other biodiversity plans and strategies for more detailed indication of targeted

actions, and such reference could be feasibly be contained therein. However this would not carry the weight of development plan policy.

## 5.6 Green Infrastructure

### 5.6.1 The Research Study Tests Framework sought to ask:

*Does the Plan have a green infrastructure strategy?*

*Does the Plan contain policies for Local Green Spaces?*

*Does the Plan include Natural England's Accessible Natural Green Space Standards or set a higher local standard?*

*Are there policies that require biodiversity to be designed into the built environment, e.g. for a strategic site or in new development to provide space for species that nest or roost in the built environment?*

#### Overview

5.6.2 The study found that **around 70%** of plans set out explicit - or were moving towards development of a Green Infrastructure strategy component of the plan. In general the *concept* of Green Infrastructure was well established in Core Strategies.

5.6.3 *Specific* reference to Local Green Spaces (in respect to the definition set out at paragraphs 76 and 77 of the NPPF) was **very infrequent** across the plan sample. However, a significant majority of Core Strategies set out policy for the protection and improved provision of accessible semi-natural green spaces, effectively serving to achieve the same community and environmental objective. Similarly, explicit reference to Natural England's established ANGSt objectives was noted in **only three plans**.

5.6.4 Around **80%** of the sample was found to explicitly require or indirectly encourage biodiversity positive habitat features within new developments.

5.6.5 Section 5.4 highlighted findings in relation to Green Infrastructure and related issues of habitat connectivity and management. This found widespread expression of Green Infrastructure aspirations within plans, and/or policy that directly supports implementations of existing local or sub-regional strategies, such as Green Grid across London.

5.6.6 Local Green Space designation (LGS), as specifically described within paragraphs 76 and 77 of NPPF is a policy component which has not been adopted across the plan sample, although most set out positive policies for

facilitating access to appropriate types, extent and proximity of public open spaces. Nevertheless, in doing so the plans generally present a policy framework within which LGSs could be a potential delivery vehicle through which to achieve strategic objectives for safeguarding of recognised and valued public spaces. Qualifying requirements for specific LGS designation suggest insufficient time may have been available following NPPF publication to enable the identification, public consultation and designation of LGSs within the plans reviewed. It remains to be seen whether emerging and proposed DPDs, such as Site Allocations DPDs will seek to identify LGS more readily, taking forward more specifically strategic policy for public open space.

- 5.6.7 Whilst there was a varied but widely embedded commitment to protecting and improving the general provision of public open space and green infrastructure across the study sample, reference to Natural England's Access to Natural Greenspace Standards (ANGSt) was noted in only three Core Strategies **Fenland**, **Leeds** and **Rother**. Other plans referred to separate *Open Space Studies* (as part of their evidence base) that had informed the plans' policy and standards for open space provision. In a number of cases such as on **Croydon** and **Leeds** it was found that meeting of standards in dense urban areas was not always a feasible or deliverable objective, and in those cases pragmatic approaches and/or different standards adopted, seeking to move *towards or reflect* ANGSt. For example, London boroughs seek to address areas of recognised deficiency in accessibility to London Local Wildlife Sites. More typically however was a deferment of identification of specific sites and adoption of local standards to within Site Allocations and Development Management focused DPDs.

## 5.7 Additional Observations

- 5.7.2 The Research Study Tests Framework sought to ask:

*Does the plan refer to Local Nature Partnerships?*

*What other document(s) relevant to biodiversity planning does the local plan refer to?*

### Overview

- 5.7.2 Local Nature Partnerships were referenced in only **20%** of the sample Core Strategies.
- 5.7.3 Reference within Core Strategies to other biodiversity planning pertinent documents and publications varied considerably but was generally restricted to supporting appendices and evidence base studies, although some supporting text to policy referenced key contextual material explicitly.

- 5.7.4 Six of the sample plans explicitly note the on-going work of established, or proposed Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) within the plan area (and outwith in a number of cases reflecting cross-boundary issues and approaches). In general these coincide with the existence of Nature Improvement Areas within the plan area, such as for **Northampton**. However, even across a significant majority of the study plans where LNPs were not explicitly referred to, supporting text to policies for the natural environment and/or implementation plans or appendices for a majority of the remaining Core Strategies overtly recognise the importance of partnership working in relation to achieving plan and policy aspirations for biodiversity. Typically, Wildlife Trusts will be identified as a key partner, whilst other organisations, including Natural England and other established Biodiversity Partnerships were also identified as key delivery stakeholders.
- 5.7.5 Across the study sample a significant variation was noted in respect of how explicitly or how broadly scoped reference to other biodiversity focused plans, studies and strategies was. Typically plans would make reference to locally specific strategies, regional or sub-regional plans, evidence studies and GI strategies within supporting text to policies, or as ‘background papers’ listed separately within supporting appendices. Most frequent examples of these would be Local Biodiversity Action Plans, Regional Biodiversity Action Plans, Green Infrastructure delivery plans and Sustainable Community Strategies. The scope of material referred to is limited by the biodiversity characteristics of each plan area and its biodiversity issues and challenges. Hence, for specific Core Strategies reference would be set out to unique documents such as Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plans, for example **Cannock Chase, Rother**, or London Downlands Green Grid Action Plan in **Croydon** and the Biodiversity Off-Setting Pilot in **North Warwickshire**. Such examples suggest positive joined-up linkages between established land-use plan functions of the Core Strategies with wider aspirations and objectives, reflecting well the underpinning principles of spatial planning.

## The RSPB

The RSPB is the country's largest conservation charity, inspiring everyone to give nature a home. Together with our partners, we protect threatened birds and wildlife so our towns, coast and countryside will teem with life once again. We play a leading role in BirdLife International, a worldwide partnership of nature conservation organisations.

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