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FAO Max Baker, Head of Planning

Bracknell Forest Council

By email only

Response of the Berkshire Local Nature Partnership to Consultation on Draft Bracknell Forest Local Plan Revised Growth Strategy

The Berkshire Local Nature Partnership (BLNP) is the single voice of organisations across a variety of sectors who are working to achieve the protection and enhancement of the natural environment in Berkshire. The BLNP represents over 15 partner organisations(1) and is a source of valuable expertise and local knowledge on the natural environment. The National Planning Policy Framework 2019 (NPPF) encourages local authorities to work with LNPs in developing strategic policies for their area(2).

The BLNP recommends that the following principles are applied in relation to the above referenced consultation:

1. **Existing biodiversity should be protected**
2. **Decisions should be made using the best available information & expertise**
3. **Development should deliver a measurable net gain for biodiversity**
4. **The planning process should conserve & enhance ecological networks**
5. **Long-term & cumulative impacts on biodiversity should be assessed & minimised**
6. **Recognise the benefits of nature in all forms to society**

These principles are described below.

1. **Existing biodiversity should be protected** in accordance with statutory duties[3]. Existing biodiversity assets should first be identified and mapped. Biodiversity assets comprise all levels of designated sites, priority habitats, protected and priority species, wildlife corridors, 'stepping stone' habitats (described further in Principle 4) and any areas identified by local or national partnerships[4].

   Allocations of land for development should favour areas with the least environmental value[5] and when determining planning applications the mitigation hierarchy[6] should be followed. This means that significant harm to biodiversity should be avoided altogether in the first instance. Impacts that cannot be avoided through relocating development should be mitigated. As a last resort, residual impacts should be compensated for by providing compensatory habitat such as an appropriately located biodiversity offset (described further in Principle 3).

   Local policies and procedures should be in place to adequately guide and regulate all activity likely to affect biodiversity.

2. **Decisions should be made using the best available information and expertise** to ensure compliance with statutory obligations and policy requirements[7], and to secure the best outcomes for biodiversity. All planning authorities should have access to specialist ecological advice, preferably that of an in-house ecology officer within the planning team.

   Planning applications should comply with BS42020[8] and ecological reports should conform with industry recommended good practice[9]. Current data from the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) should be referenced.

3. **Development should deliver a measurable net gain for biodiversity** in line with government planning for the environment[10] and national planning policy[11]. Biodiversity net gain should follow industry principles for good practice[12] and be measured objectively with a biodiversity impact assessment calculation ("biodiversity metric"), based on government guidance[13]. A *de minimis* approach to biodiversity net gain is not considered acceptable by this Partnership, and where there exists no locally-set minimum threshold for net gain, we consider an increase of at least 20% above the baseline biodiversity value should be required. This allows for error in measurements and embeds a contingency margin against failure. This minimum net gain is implemented by local planning authorities elsewhere[14].

   Habitat creation should be guided by the objectives of the requisite local Biodiversity Action Plan, the Berkshire biodiversity strategy[15], and government biodiversity strategy[16].

   Where biodiversity offsets are required to enable a development to achieve a net gain these should be located in the places where they will deliver the greatest benefit for biodiversity. This means in locations identified within a local biodiversity offsetting strategy, where they will contribute to the nature recovery network. Where a development

is located within a Biodiversity Opportunity Area (BOA)[17] it would be appropriate to deliver the biodiversity offset within the same BOA.

4. **The planning process should conserve and enhance ecological networks** in accordance with national planning policy[18]. Ecological networks comprise existing biodiversity assets, the habitat that connects them, and any new areas identified for habitat restoration. They are the means of ensuring biodiversity resilience in the face of environmental change (e.g. climate, land use, etc.) enabling species to move across the landscape between core areas of habitat (e.g. existing designated sites) and to re-occupy newly restored habitat. Government planning for the environment refers to these networks as nature recovery networks[10].

   These networks should be mapped and a plan of action to conserve and enhance them should be detailed in an appropriate strategy.

   Multifunctional green infrastructure[19] should be embedded in the design of all new development, and be guided by a local green infrastructure strategy. Green infrastructure should complement the ecological network.

   New development should contribute to the ecological network. The connectivity of habitats to be created should be assessed as part of the planning process using a biodiversity metric.

5. **Long-term and cumulative impacts on biodiversity should be assessed and minimised** in line with national planning policy requirements to ensure biodiversity resilience[20]. Any measures required to mitigate for development impacts on biodiversity must be in place for the foreseeable future ensuring biodiversity remains protected from those impacts for the whole lifetime of the development.

   Biodiversity offsets should be guaranteed permanently using appropriate legal agreements, to avoid a scenario whereby land set aside as compensatory habitat is later developed during the next planning cycle.

   Strategic plans should identify potential future, cumulative, or synergistic impacts arising over time from development and include mechanisms to minimise these. This could be in the form of developer contributions towards protecting biodiversity.

6. **Recognised the benefits of nature in all forms to society**, in the shape of direct and indirect benefits to public health, wellbeing, and the economy.

   Nature provides many benefits in the form of *goods* ('things', such as minerals, water, timber) and *services* (functions it performs, such as pollination, carbon sequestration, water filtration, recreation). When cast in economic terms, the value of these benefits to society is known as natural capital. A landscape-scale plan for enhancing natural capital should be developed as part of the strategic planning process to comply with national planning policy[21], using the approach recommended by government's Natural Capital Committee[22].

If you require any further clarification on the matters raised above please contact the Partnership on info@berkshirelnp.org.

Yours faithfully,

Dan Carpenter

Chair

Berkshire Local Nature Partnership

Endnotes -

(1) Organisations currently represented by the Berkshire Local Nature Partnership: Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust, Berkshire Ornithological Club, Bracknell Forest Borough Council, British Entomological and Natural History Society, Butterfly Conservation, Environment Agency, National Farmers' Union, Reading Borough Council, Slough Borough Council, Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre, Thames Water, The Conservation Volunteers, University of Reading, West Berkshire Council, Wokingham Borough Council.

(2) NPPF - paragraph 25

(3) The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006) states that a public authority *"must, in exercising its functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity."*

(4) NPPF – paragraph 174

(5) NPPF – paragraph 171

(6) NPPF – paragraph 175

(7) NPPF – paragraph 43

(8) Code of Practice for Planning and Development - BS42020 : 2013

(9) Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) Guidelines on Ecological Report-writing, Preliminary Ecological Appraisal, Ecological Impact Assessment, Accessing and Using Biodiversity Data.

(10) A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment, HM Government, 2018

(11) NPPF – paragraphs 8, 32, 170, 174, 175 (net gain), 20, 141, 172, (enhance natural environment, biodiversity, wildlife)

(12) Biodiversity Net Gain: Good practice principles for development. CIEEM, CIRIA, IEMA, 2016

(13) Biodiversity Offsetting Pilots Technical Paper: the metric for the biodiversity offsetting pilot in England, DEFRA, 2012

(14) Biodiversity and Development Supplementary Planning Document, Lichfield District Council, 2016

(15) The Natural Environment in Berkshire: Biodiversity Strategy 2014-2020, Berkshire Local Nature Partnership

(16) Biodiversity 2020: A Strategy for England's Wildlife and Ecosystem Services, DEFRA, 2011

(17) BOAs are mapped landscape-scale areas that identify where the greatest opportunities for habitat creation and restoration lie. This enables resources to be efficiently focused to where they will have the greatest positive conservation impact.

(18) NPPF – paragraphs 170, 174

(19) NPPF – paragraphs 20, 150, 171

(20) NPPF – paragraphs 20, 149

(21) NPPF – paragraph 171

(22) How to do it: a natural capital workbook, version 1, Natural Capital Committee, HM Government, 2017

All documents referenced above should be freely available online.