



ASSOCIATION OF
Local Government Ecologists

**Implications for Local Government of delivering the Environment Bill and the
Government's 25 year plan to improve the environment**

Author
Murray Davidson

January 2020

Association of Local Government Ecologists

The Association of Local Government Ecologists (ALGE) was established in 1994. It is the only association in the UK that provides support for professional officers with responsibility for biodiversity and nature conservation in Local Authorities and National Parks.

ALGE's aims are to:

- Promote and develop good principles and practice for biodiversity, nature conservation, and sustainable development in local government, including National Parks, through its members;
- Maintain an active advice and support forum amongst its members for the exchange of information and ideas on biodiversity and nature conservation matters;
- Provide regular advice on biodiversity and nature conservation matters on behalf of members to government, local authority associations, chief officer societies and others;

ALGE has members throughout England and within all types of local authority, including county, district, unitary and metropolitan councils, as well as in National Parks.

ALGE also has members in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

All members of ALGE work as specialist professionals, often working alongside a multi-disciplinary team of landscape architects, archaeologists, countryside and public rights of way staff, and other planning colleagues. They may be the sole representative of the ecological profession in their authority, and may therefore often not have the benefit of direct professional support and advice from colleagues within their workplace on nature conservation and biodiversity matters. ALGE therefore provides a forum for exchange of experience and knowledge and offers support on various topical matters.

The 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment and the Environment Bill; Implications for Local Government

Association of Local Government Ecologists

Executive Summary and Recommendations to Government

The Association of Local Government Ecologists (ALGE) welcomes the 25 Year Plan and the Environment Bill 2020 as positive steps in addressing our pressing environmental challenges.

Government recognises local authorities are essential partners in implementing the 25 Year Plan and the principles of the Environment Bill.

It is essential that Local Authorities understand how the 25 Year Plan affects them in order to develop policy and practice locally to deliver the principles of the Plan. Currently ALGE feel there is a gap between the ambitions of the 25 Year Plan and the local delivery mechanism, skills and capacity available to achieve the Plan's outcomes.

The Association of Local Government Ecologists recommends, as a matter of urgency, the establishment of a National Strategic Working Group for the Environment with ALGE, LGA and DEFRA to;

1. Identify competency, capacity and skills gaps and identify training for local authorities to deliver the Environment Bill and the 25 Year Plan;
2. Ensure local authorities have recourse to sufficient expertise and are competent to deliver nature recovery network strategies, biodiversity net gain and to ensure these are linked to and presented within local plans and strategies.
3. Ensure the new Environmental Land Management scheme recognises the important role local authorities play in managing farmland and nature reserves; ensure the new grant is easy for public sector organisations to access and is properly targeted at biodiversity land management as well as sustainable food production;
4. Establish a strong network of local authority decision makers to ensure local authorities drive and influence the changes necessary to recover nature in line with the principles of the 25 Year Plan.
5. Map, prioritise and provide guidance on the relationship between existing initiatives such as local natural capital plans, natural capital investment strategies, catchment management plans, biodiversity opportunity areas, nature improvement areas, etc. and Nature Recovery Strategies.
6. Ensure that that green infrastructure plans and other strategies such as nature recovery networks, biodiversity net gain and spatial strategies and policies for biodiversity recovery, all deliver the added benefits of mental and physical wellbeing of local communities.
7. Ensure the new Biodiversity Strategy dovetails with and complements the principles of 25 Year Environment Plan and does not compete or duplicate existing strategies or add additional burdens on local authorities.

1 Background

ALGE presented a written submission to the Environmental Audit Committee on the 25 Year Plan Inquiry in February 2018. We welcomed the Plan as a positive step in addressing our pressing environmental challenges. The current Environment Bill supports the delivery of the 25 Year Plan in order to bring about meaningful action to deal with those challenges.

In this paper ALGE considers key implications for Local Government and identifies key recommendations for a partnership between Government, LGA and ALGE to ensure local government has the necessary skills and capacity to meet their new responsibilities to implement the Environment Bill and the 25 Year Plan

2 Why local government is crucial to the success of 25 Year Plan

Local Authorities are key place shapers and community leaders. Government recognises the essential role that Local Authorities will play in delivering the principles and actions of the 25 Year Plan and delivering environmental ambitions at the local level.

It is essential that Local Authorities understand how the 25 Year Plan affects them in order to develop policy and practice locally to deliver the principles of the Plan. Currently ALGE feel there is a gap between the ambitions of the 25 Year Plan and the local delivery mechanism, skills and capacity available to achieve the Plan's outcomes. Many Local authorities have neither the capacity nor the capability to deliver the 25 Year Plan.

Some local authorities are pressing ahead with new plans and policies as a result of the 25 Year Plan and the principles of the Environment Bill; others are not. Strategic guidance and clarification is required for local authorities to implement the principles of the Plan and Bill consistently.

It is essential a strong national partnership is formed between ALGE, LGA and DEFRA to assess capacity and capability and help prepare local authority decision makers to fully understand their role in implementing the Plan.

3 How the 25 Year Plan can be delivered through local authorities

Biodiversity net gain for housing and development

The 25 Year Plan identifies net gain as a principle for planning and development to help recover nature. The Environment Bill introduces biodiversity net gain as a mandatory instrument for planning authorities to ensure that new developments enhance biodiversity and help deliver thriving natural spaces for communities. ALGE welcomes this principle and highlights that careful consideration is required over;

- How local planning authorities will resource and identify relevant skills and capacity to deliver the new principle;
- How the principle is delivered through local planning policy and decision making;
- How the net gain principle is effectively implemented with developers at the local level;
- Ensuring strategic local planning policy is delivered through development control;

- Consistency of approach in what net gain looks like, how it is calculated and how net gains are implemented across local authority areas.

It is essential planning officers are competent to assess applications where biodiversity net gain is required and to apply the principles consistently to ensure the success of this part of the 25 Year Plan.

The 25 Year Plan recognises that work is required with interested parties to expand and improve the range of tools and guidance that support biodiversity net gain. This also includes strengthening the principles and standards around green infrastructure which is a key planning policy tool for local government in promoting greener developments in our towns and cities.

ALGE identifies a principal training requirement for local government planners and ecologists, as well as private sector planners and developers, to develop and understand the skills required to implement net gain; how to apply the principles and ensure it is delivered through policy and development control decisions.

ALGE feel there is merit in developing a consistent model planning policy together with its calculation metric to assist planners implement the principle consistently in the UK. There is currently no model policy for planners to reference and no consistency of approach to implementing net gain in local planning authorities. Guidance is urgently required.

The strategic working group should;

Work with RTPI to address training, skills and the implementation of net gain for local planning authorities to;

- Identify skills and competency gaps and identify a consistent training to implement the net gain principle in local authorities;
- Achieve consistent implementation within planning authorities in the UK;
- Explore model planning policies for net gain;
- Ensure there are no additional financial or resource burdens on local authorities or developers in implementing net gain;
- Explore ways of producing stronger standards for green infrastructure and ways to implement those standards in local planning authority policy and development functions.
- Link nature reserve management with planning and biodiversity net gain to target resources at managing the countryside and nature reserves in local authority areas.
- Ensure the British Standard, BS42020 Biodiversity – Code of practice for planning and development; is reviewed during 2020 to be consistent with the draft British Standard for Net Gain.

4 Improving how we manage and incentivise land management

Following our exit from the European Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) a new approach to land management, the Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme will replace the current Countryside Stewardship scheme. We understand the details of the new scheme are yet to be finalised.

ALGE welcomes the new principle of paying land managers to invest in environmental enhancements and to reward sound environmental benefits. ALGE recognises that managing the countryside sustainably will help restore habitats and reverse the decline in biodiversity that sits at the heart of the 25 Year Plan.

ALGE notes that Countryside Stewardship grants are/were aimed principally at farmers but recognise that management of the countryside is not the preserve of farmers alone. Local Authorities and third sector organisations manage large tracts of land which are currently under the current Countryside Stewardship grant schemes. DEFRA have identified that Local Authorities own and manage almost as much land designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest than the Wildlife Trusts and National Trust put together.

It is essential that the new ELM is accessible by local authorities to manage nature reserves, SSSIs and farms in the countryside that demonstrate innovative land management aimed at reversing habitat and biodiversity loss. Further, the criteria for ELM should ensure that resources are available for projects and schemes that are within areas of deficiency for access to nature to provide appropriate public access for activities aimed at enhancing biodiversity and improving health and wellbeing.

The strategic working group should;

1. Ensure the ELM scheme recognises the important role local authorities play in managing farmland and nature reserves; ensure the new grant is easy for public sector organisations to access and is properly targeted at biodiversity land management as well as sustainable food production;

5 A Strategy for Nature

ALGE welcomes the aim of the 25 Year Plan to support nature's recovery and restore losses suffered over the past 50 years. We also welcome government's commitment to working with partners to learn the lessons from the existing Biodiversity 2020 Strategy in developing a new strategy.

The 25 Year Plan sets out a long term vision and objectives for reversing the decline in biodiversity and habitats. There are currently a number of strategic biodiversity and nature focused strategies and plans that local authorities are responsible for. It is essential duplication of effort is avoided and clear priorities in reporting identified.

The strategic working group should;

1. Ensure the new Biodiversity Strategy dovetails with and complements the principles of 25 Year Environment Plan and does not compete or duplicate existing strategies or add additional burdens on local authorities.

6 Developing a Nature Recovery Network

ALGE welcomes the proposal to strengthen the biodiversity duty on public authorities to conserving biodiversity. However there is little clarity on what this means for local government and the actions, strategically and locally, they can take to conserve and enhance biodiversity.

The 25 Year Environment Plan and Environment Bill make provision for the development of Local Nature Recovery Strategies across England. ALGE welcomes the provision of nature recovery strategies to reverse the losses suffered by our native wildlife and habitats.

ALGE agrees that implementing Nature Recovery Strategies will support better spatial planning for nature recovery and identify opportunities and areas for investing in nature in local areas.

Government recognises that local authorities and other public bodies will identify priorities and opportunities for conserving and enhancing nature and that these policies will support strategic planning for housing, infrastructure and net gain investment to ensure the greatest benefits for local wildlife and people.

ALGE note there are currently a raft of strategies and plans for nature; local natural capital plans, natural capital investment strategies, catchment management plans, biodiversity opportunity areas, nature improvement areas, green infrastructure plans, etc. How existing plans and strategies fit together and are prioritised with nature recovery strategies requires urgent clarification for local authorities.

The strategic working group should;

- 1 Map, prioritise and provide guidance on the relationship between Nature Recovery Strategies and existing initiatives such as local natural capital plans, natural capital investment strategies, catchment management plans, biodiversity opportunity areas, nature improvement areas, etc.

Connecting people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing

ALGE recognise the intrinsic links between access to, and enjoyment of, a high quality environment and the physical and mental health and wellbeing of individuals and local communities as a whole.

Local authorities already lead on the health and wellbeing in nature agenda. This agenda fits well with the strategic principles of nature recovery, biodiversity enhancement and green infrastructure as outlined in the 25 Year Plan. ALGE consider that greater consistency is required in how local authorities roll out and implement a health and well-being agenda within the principles of nature recovery and biodiversity enhancement. This is crucial in areas with high levels of deprivation or which score highly in indices of multiple deprivation where there is often limited or poor access to nature.

The strategic working group should;

- 1 Ensure that that green infrastructure plans and other strategies such as nature recovery networks, biodiversity net gain and spatial strategies and policies for biodiversity recovery, all deliver the added benefits of mental and physical wellbeing of local communities.

7 Local authority skills and capacity to deliver the Bill and the 25 Year Plan

The implementation of the Environment Bill and the 25 Year Plan requires local authorities to have access to specialist skills together with adequate capacity to deliver new environmental and biodiversity priorities.

Currently there are 94 individual authorities with ecological expertise who are ALGE members. Those ecologists may not necessarily provide input to the planning system and may not have the skills or capacity to deliver the new and specialist input to the planning system.

Given there are 343 local planning authorities in England, ALGE would argue strongly that there is insufficient specialist skills in local government to deal with the new priorities of the Environment Bill and the 25 Year Plan.

ALGE advise an urgent review is required to assess the specialist skills and capacity in local government and planning authorities required to implement the key initiatives of the Bill and 25 Year Plan and identify solutions to skills and capacity gaps.

The strategic working group should;

- 1 Assess the roles and responsibilities, capacity and skills required by local authorities to respond to deliver the Environment Bill and the 25 Year Plan;
- 2 Identify the skills and capacity gaps within local government and the risks to delivering new priorities arising from the Environment Bill and the 25 Year Plan;
2. Assess how many local planning authorities have access to professional ecology advice in respect of planning;
3. Develop a solutions based training/competency/skills framework for ecologists and local authorities to deliver the Environment Bill and the 25 Year Plan.

8 Conclusions

- The 25 Year Plan for the Environment Bill provides a blueprint for nature recovery over the coming decades.
- Local Authorities are critical to the implementation and success of the 25 Year Plan and the Environment Bill.
- It is essential that Local Authorities understand their role in the successful delivery of the Plan and are supported through identification of skills and capacity gaps, training and skills development; improved competence and professional expertise to meet the challenges imposed by their new duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity and implement the objectives of the 25 Year Plan.
- As local decision makers and place shapers, local authority officers and decision makers will be responsible for developing strategic plans and policies that integrate nature recovery networks and green infrastructure, biodiversity net gain and improving nature for wildlife and local people within their local plans.
- It is ALGE's view that the 25 Year Plan and Environment Bill, whilst laudable strategic policy documents, lack a delivery mechanism for local authorities, many of whom lack the capacity or capability to implement key areas they are responsible for.
- It is essential a strategic working group is established as a matter of urgency between Government, ALGE and the LGA to develop detailed national proposals for implementing the Plan at the local level and identify the key specialist requirements, skills and gaps in local authorities' abilities to implement the Environment Bill and the 25 Year Plan.

- ALGE note that whilst most local authorities have declared biodiversity and climate emergencies, their ability respond to those emergencies is inadequately resourced through skills and capacity, a picture that is consistent with their lack of capacity and skills in delivering new priorities under the Environment Bill and the 25 Year Plan.