

# Urban Nature Recovery Standard User Guide

Green Infrastructure Framework – Principles and Standards for England

September 2024

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# 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Urban Nature Recovery Standard is one of the five [Headline Green Infrastructure Standards](#) within the [Green Infrastructure Framework](#). These standards are voluntary. While the accompanying four standards emphasise the importance of strategic approaches, accessibility, greening, and tree cover, the Urban Nature Recovery Standard focusses on enhancing biodiversity. This standard is comprised of targets to improve, expand, and connect the diversity of habitats and species associated with Green Infrastructure in urban and urban fringe areas.
- 1.2 This Urban Nature Recovery **Standard User Guide** can be used alongside the Green Infrastructure Framework's [Guide for developing Green Infrastructure Strategies and Policies](#) (a step-by-step Process Guide for local authorities).

## 2.0 Policy Context

- 2.1 The Urban Nature Recovery Standard contributes to the delivery of many of the policies which seek to reverse the decline in biodiversity and make the places we live a better environment for people. The core policy drivers that the Urban Nature Recovery Standard supports include:
  - [National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949](#) (the 1949 Act). Section 21 gave powers to local authorities to declare nature reserves. Local nature reserves provide places for both people and nature. The Urban Nature Recovery Standard includes a target that all local authorities should provide 1ha of LNR per 1000 population.
  - Section 102 of the [Environment Act 2021](#) amended the general biodiversity duty to require public bodies not only to conserve biodiversity but to enhance biodiversity. By using The Urban Nature Recovery Standard to deliver more and enhanced GI that is that is managed for nature, public bodies can evidence that they are discharging this duty.
  - [The Environmental Improvement Plan](#) includes actions to improve access to nature, including a commitment that everyone should live within 15 minutes' walk of a green or blue space. It also recognises that 'good quality green infrastructure is important for health and wellbeing, air quality, nature recovery and for delivering net zero' and commits to 'Monitor and evaluate the impact of the Green Infrastructure Framework.
  - The Urban Nature Recovery Standard responds to the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) through supporting the enhancement of biodiversity and creation of connected ecological networks.

- The Urban Nature Recovery Standard presents an opportunity to meet the statutory requirements of [Biodiversity Net Gain](#) (BNG). BNG is designed to encourage habitat protection, enhancement, and creation on-site and in local areas where possible. The Urban Nature Recovery Standard when applied following the GI principles can help to increase the functionality of habitat delivered as a requirement of BNG.

## 3.0 The Urban Nature Recovery Standard

### 3.1 Area-wide:

- In urban and urban fringe areas, the proportion of green infrastructure that is designed and managed for nature recovery is increased by an agreed percentage based on a locally defined baseline and taking into account local needs, opportunities and constraints. This includes the creation and restoration of wildlife rich habitats, which can contribute to the delivery of local nature recovery objectives.
- Local authorities in urban and urban fringe areas set targets for nature recovery through provision and sustainable management of Local Nature Reserves and Local Wildlife Sites, to:
  - Provide 1 hectare of Local Nature Reserve (LNR) per 1,000 population (for nature conservation and quiet enjoyment).
  - Enhance existing and identify new areas that qualify as Local Wildlife Sites (for nature conservation).

### 3.2 Major Development:

- The developer identifies in the Green Infrastructure Plan for the development (or in the Design and Access Statement, as appropriate), its contribution to nature recovery and the creation and restoration of wildlife rich habitats, which can contribute to the delivery of local nature recovery objectives, including the potential for creation or enhancement of Local Nature Reserves or Local Wildlife Sites.

### 3.3 Wildlife rich habitats are defined in the [Environment Act Habitat Target – Definitions and Descriptions](#) (See Table 2 Page 9.)

## 4.0 Setting Targets

- 4.1 The Urban Nature Recovery Standard provides flexibility for stakeholders to define their own targets actions to achieve them. For example, targets can include:

- Restoration or creation of wildlife-rich habitat on land or water where such habitat is currently absent.
  - Improving the condition, structure, or composition of existing wildlife-rich habitats.
  - Actions to enhance the biodiversity value of other habitats such as amenity grassland, through maintenance regimes.
  - Actions to increase connectivity of ecological networks.
  - Actions to increase opportunities for contact with nature.
- 4.2 There is opportunity for Urban Nature Recovery Standard targets to be delivered through mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain requirements.
- 4.3 Where a local authority or other stakeholders wishes the increase in wildlife-rich habitat to count towards the Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 targets, they will need to meet specific criteria as detailed in [Environment Act Habitat Target – Definitions and Descriptions](#).
- i. “To restore or create more than 500,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitats outside of protected sites by 2042.”
  - ii. An interim target was also set within the EIP23: “To restore or create 140,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitats outside protected sites by 2028.”
- 4.4 Compensatory action that replaces habitat lost due to land-use change such as permitted developments and compensation measures for European Sites will not count. Note that where excess habitat is created the excess can count, but not the replacement habitat.

## Percentage Uplift

- 4.5 Establishing a robust baseline, considering local factors, and integrating nature recovery priorities will allow aspirational but realistic targets to be developed for the increase in the amount of GI that can be created or managed where nature recovery is the primary objective; for the declaration of new Local Nature Reserves (LNR) and for the identification of new Local Wildlife Sites (LWS). A one size fits all approach to target setting is not appropriate for a variety of reasons.
- 4.6 Areas will be at different stages of their nature recovery journey. Some areas have already changed the way they manage GI to deliver nature recovery and to achieve sustainability and ecosystem service benefits. In these cases, the scope to achieve further gains through changes in management may be more limited than in those where management changes have been carried out to a lesser extent.
- 4.7 Many local authorities will have a long-established program for the declaration of [Local Nature Reserves](#) (LNR) and may be well on the way to meeting or have exceeded the target of having 1ha of LNR per 1000 population. Others may have only a few and little immediate opportunity to declare more due to the lack of suitable sites.

- 4.8 In many urban areas, [Local Wildlife Sites](#) may have already been identified and taken through the formal recognition process. In other areas the identification of urban LWS may still need to take place. Even where urban LWS are recognised the Local Nature Recovery Strategy may identify habitats and species which are under-represented and where new LWS need to be identified.
- 4.9 In 2018, the Wildlife Trusts published a report on the [status of England's Local Wildlife Sites](#). There was some evidence that in urban areas the proportion of LWS in public ownership was greater than in more rural areas. Securing appropriate and long-term management of urban LWS may therefore be easier in urban areas but there will still be many LWS in private ownership where securing appropriate management will rely on good engagement with private owners.

## Local Nature Reserves

- 4.10 Local Nature Reserves are included in the Urban Nature Recovery Standard, which states that:

Local authorities in urban and urban fringe areas set targets for nature recovery through provision and sustainable management of Local Nature Reserves and Local Wildlife Sites, to:

- Provide 1 hectare of Local Nature Reserve (LNR) per 1,000 population (for nature conservation and quiet enjoyment).

And in major developments:

- The developer identifies in the Green Infrastructure Plan for the development (or in the Design and Access Statement, as appropriate), its contribution to nature recovery and the creation and restoration of wildlife rich habitats, which can contribute to the delivery of local nature recovery objectives, including the potential for creation or enhancement of Local Nature Reserves or Local Wildlife Sites.

### Calculating the local authority baseline against the LNR Standard

- 4.11 A local authority can calculate their baseline for the LNR Standard of 1 ha per 1,000 population, by dividing the total area of LNR within the local authority area (at district/ borough or unitary scale) by your population and multiplying by 1000. For example, if you have 250ha of LNRs and your population is 514,365 your equation is:

$$250/514,365 \times 1000 = 0.49\text{ha per } 1,000 \text{ population}$$

### Benefits of declaring LNRs and the LNR Standard

- 4.12 By declaring LNRs, local authorities can provide many benefits for both people and nature. LNRs are an ideal environment for everyone to learn about and study nature

and provide opportunities for contact with nature, to benefit **people's** health and wellbeing.

- 4.13 Most Local Nature Reserves are accessible to the public. Declaring new LNRs can help **to achieve the Government's commitment that everyone lives within 15 minutes' walk** (or equivalent) of a green or blue space.
- 4.14 A Local Nature Reserve is a statutory designation, it is a very clear signal to a local community of the local authority's commitment to nature conservation. A further advantage of declaring a site as a LNR is that the local authority can bring in LNR byelaws to address any problems or misuse. DEFRA must agree the byelaws and Natural England is a consultee.
- 4.15 For LNRs to deliver the benefits mentioned, they need to be of good quality. Natural England recommends to local authorities that LNRs should be:
- Greater than 2ha in size although smaller areas can be considered.
  - Capable of being managed with the nature recovery and the maintenance of special opportunities for study, research, or enjoyment of nature as the main concern.
- 4.16 LNRs should be either:
- of high natural interest in the local context, or
  - Of some reasonable natural interest and of high value in the local context for formal education or research, or
  - Of some reasonable natural interest and of high value in the local context for the informal enjoyment of nature by the public
- 4.17 Local authorities need to assure themselves of the legal status of any land before designating a Local Nature Reserve.
- 4.18 Please refer to Appendix 1 for frequently asked questions on LNRs.

## 5.0 Further Considerations when applying the Urban Nature Recovery Standard

- 5.1 In 2020, the Government committed to protecting 30% of the UK's land by 2030 (30by30) and in 2022 this target was adopted globally as part of the Global Biodiversity Framework at the UN Biodiversity Summit COP15. [Delivering 30by30 on land in England](#), provides guidance on how the 30by30 target can be achieved, with further guidance coming soon. Urban areas have a role in contributing to the 30by30 target as the majority will have areas of GI that deliver each of the three pillars that are central to the target. Where local GI does not meet the national criteria for inclusion in the target, considering the three pillars in the delivery of the Urban Nature Recovery Standard will help ensure targets are robust.

5.2 Targets should also be considered to increase ecological connectivity. There are many methods that can be used to measure the functional connectivity and structural connectivity of a green infrastructure network. Functional connectivity refers to how well species can move from one habitat patch to another based upon their dispersal abilities and the nature of the intervening land cover. Structural connectivity refers to how habitat patches are distributed across a landscape and whether they are physically connected to each other by the same or similar habitat. For simplicity we suggest using one of more of the following three metrics:

- The average GI patch size, which should be larger in more connected systems. A patch is a discrete area of GI that does not link physically to any other GI areas. In some cases, it could be appropriate to count patches that are within a certain buffer distance (e.g. 20 metres) as being connected, if they are, for example, only disconnected by a quiet road. However, a busy road with no crossing points is a real barrier to GI connectivity both for wildlife and people. Linking two patches together, e.g., with a new line of trees or greenway, will create a new larger patch and the average patch size will increase.
- The size of the largest connected patch. This can also increase if several existing large patches are linked together with new linear GI features.
- The overlap between the GI network and the Nature Recovery Network. This can be measured either as the total area of GI network (in hectares), or the percentage, that either overlaps with or connects to the NRN.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 – Local Nature Reserve Frequently Asked Questions

1. Where can I find out how to declare a Local Nature Reserve?

The official guidance on LNRs is on gov.uk: [Local nature reserves: setting up and management](#)

Local authorities must consult Natural England before declaring an LNR. The email address to send your consultation to is: [enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk). Your email will be responded to by either the central hub or a member of your local area team.

2. How do Natural England consent a Local Nature Reserve designation?

All decisions regarding Local Nature Reserves are with the Local Authority. There is a clear separation in roles between the local authority as decision maker and the role of Natural England as adviser and consultee. Natural England does not have power to stop a local authority making any particular decision. Natural England, in its role as statutory consultee can provide expert advice to the local authority to guide the local authority in its powers and duties with respect to the Local Nature Reserve and wider natural environment.

3. How do I de-declare an LNR, or change the boundary?

The responsibility for deciding whether or not to de-declare a part of the Local Nature Reserve is with the local authority. Natural England is a statutory consultee regarding that decision. The key questions to address regarding de-declaration are the necessity and reasons for the de-declaration. When consulting Natural England, local authorities are asked to set these out and demonstrate the reasonableness of their decision in de-declaring the LNR. They are asked to explain why the impacts on the LNR cannot be avoided or mitigated and why all or part of the LNR cannot continue to be managed for its statutory purpose. The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 (as amended) provides that if land within the LNR can no longer be managed for the purpose of the LNR or if the LNR is no longer under the control of the local authority then de-declaration would be required.

If LNR de-declaration is unavoidable, the local authority should consider declaring replacement LNR land which is at least equal to or higher value in terms of nature conservation, access and landscape than the area to be de-declared. Alternatively, it may be possible where there are small partial de-declarations for improvements in the quality of the remaining LNR to be offered to counteract the loss in land area. After consultation with Natural England, the LA will need to seek their own legal advice to draw up a formal de-declaration document and complete other necessary

consultations and approvals. Natural England must receive a copy of any de-declaration notices and accompanying maps.

If an LNR is also a Site of Special Scientific Interest, the owner/ manager (often a local authority in the case of LNRs) must comply with the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended).

If Local Authorities wish to amend boundaries to LNRs, they may require a combination of declaration (where land is taken into the LNR), and de-declaration (where land is removed for the reserve). The local authority is advised to combine the two processes and run as a single integrated exercise, i.e. consulting Natural England once about the overall proposal, etc. The local authority's legal department would be in a position to advise on legal details applying in each situation.

4. Can a LNR be sold?

Under the 1949 Act, a local authority must have a legal interest in the land for it to be a LNR, through ownership, lease or an agreement with the owners and occupiers involved. Therefore, if a local authority is planning to sell an LNR, it needs to enter into a management agreement with the new owners (and managers) of the LNR. The sale of an LNR by a local authority does not remove the responsibility of the local authority for the provision of that LNR. As local authorities need to consult Natural England about all aspects of the provision of LNRs, they need to consult Natural England on the sale and management agreement. The Management Plan should be updated, and again NE should be consulted on this.

5. Are there any restrictions on what land can become a Local Nature Reserve?

Yes, in limited circumstances there are restrictions on land with other designations, statuses or accredited on another way. This issue is sometimes known as statutory incompatibility. Local Authorities must seek their own legal advice about this, prior to designation.

*For example, land held through powers under the Open Spaces Act 1906 or land held under powers in the Countryside Act 1968 as a Country Park or land provided or managed as a Site of Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) may not be designated as LNR as the primary purposes of these areas (public enjoyment, public access or public recreation).*

6. When is a nature reserve agreement needed?

A local authority must be able to ensure that the LNR is managed as such, meaning they need to have a legal interest in the land, through ownership, lease or a nature reserve agreement with the owners and occupiers involved. A nature reserve agreement is made between the declaring authority and landowners and/ or managers. It needs to meet the requirements of s7 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. (This amends the original section in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act part 3) and binding on successors in title. It is the

Local Authority's responsibility to ensure that Section 7 is complied with in the drafting of LNR agreements. Local Authorities should obtain their own legal advice in developing a nature reserve agreement.

Natural England is here to secure a healthy natural environment for people to enjoy, where wildlife is protected and **England's traditional landscapes are** safeguarded for future generations.

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