Local Nature Recovery Toolkit: Further Information on the Development of Priorities

Background

As per the Environment Act, each Local Nature Recovery Strategy must include:

1. **A Statement of Biodiversity Priorities**, including:

    i. A description of the strategy area and its biodiversity

    ii. Opportunities for recovering or enhancing biodiversity in the strategy area

    iii. Priorities for biodiversity recovery or enhancement, considering contributions to other environmental benefits

    iv. Proposals for potential measures related to those priorities

2. **A Local Habitat Map** that identifies:

    i. national conservation sites in the strategy area

    ii. local nature reserves in the strategy area

    iii. other areas in the strategy area which:

    are, or could become, of particular importance for biodiversity, or

    are areas where the recovery or enhancement of biodiversity could make a particular contribution to other environmental benefits

The priorities and potential measures table builds on the State of Nature and Opportunities for Nature Recovery to set out the priorities (point 1.iii) and measures (point 1.iv) for the Local Nature Recovery Toolkit, which acts as the LNRS for the Mayoral Combined Authority and North Somerset. The priorities are the outcomes for nature recovery that have been identified as the most important locally, and the measures are suggestions for how they could be delivered.

The priorities and measures should be read alongside the Interactive Map (the Local Habitat Map), as many of the priorities and measures are relevant to specific areas, which the Interactive Map will make clear.
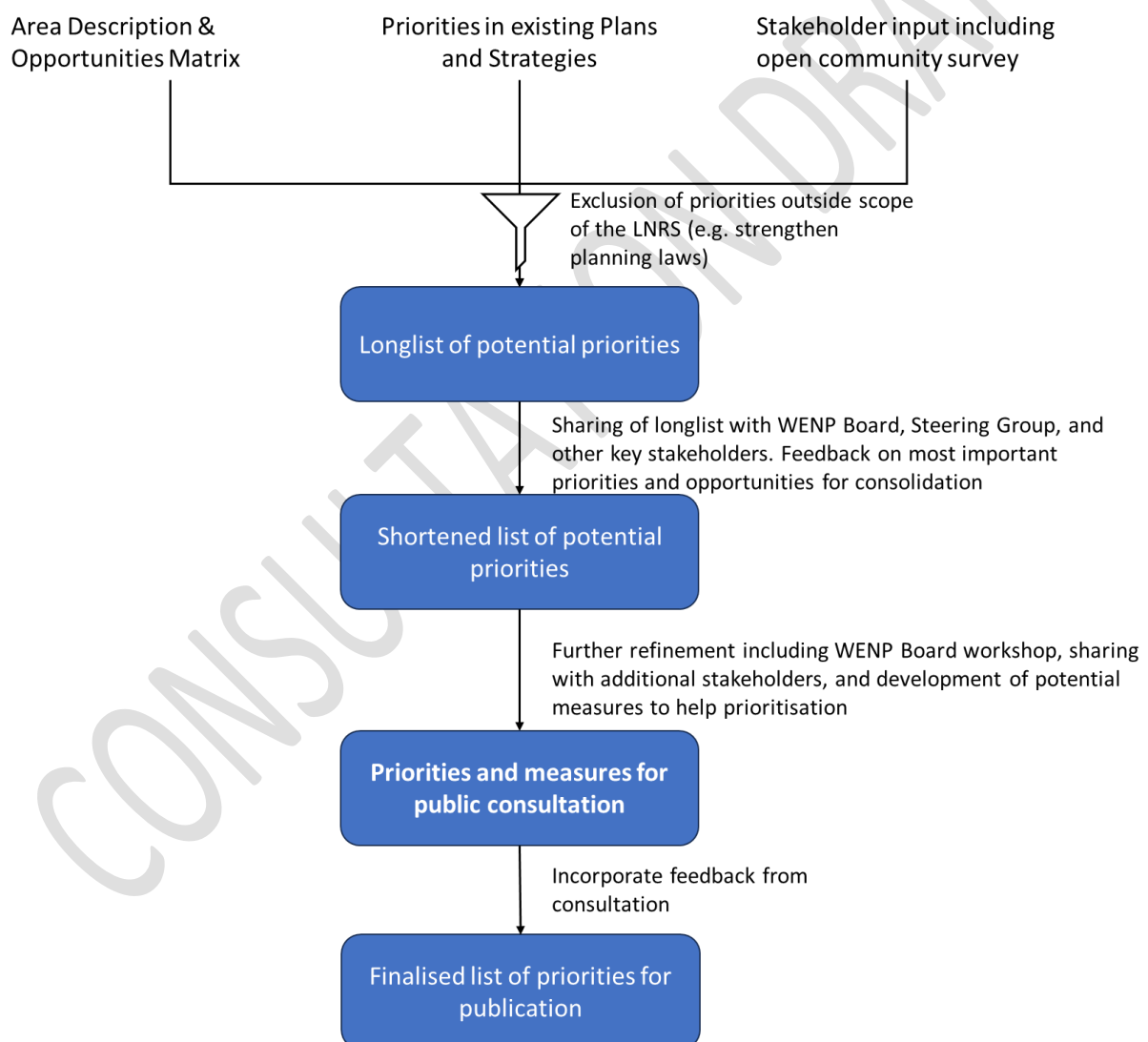
The Approach to identifying Priorities for Nature Recovery

The identification of priorities for nature recovery and the mapping of focus areas for nature recovery have both built upon the description of nature and opportunities for nature recovery set out in 'State of Nature and Opportunities' document.

The remainder of this section gives an overview of how we progressed from the Area Description to a set of priorities and mapped focus areas for nature recovery.

Outline of the steps taken to agree a list of priorities

The steps taken to agree the list of priorities, following the principles and approach set out above, are summarised in this section. The diagram below condenses this process into a flow diagram.

Area Description & Opportunities Matrix	Priorities in existing Plans and Strategies	Stakeholder input including open community survey

Exclusion of priorities outside scope of the LNRS (e.g. strengthen planning laws)

Longlist of potential priorities

Sharing of longlist with WENP Board, Steering Group, and other key stakeholders. Feedback on most important priorities and opportunities for consolidation

Shortened list of potential priorities

Further refinement including WENP Board workshop, sharing with additional stakeholders, and development of potential measures to help prioritisation

Priorities and measures for public consultation

Incorporate feedback from consultation

Finalised list of priorities for publication

Step one: Area Description

We followed the statutory guidance to develop an Area Description that included detail on the key habitats and species in the region, pressures on nature, and opportunities for nature recovery. This included a detailed Appendix on the state of nature and pressures in different parts of the West of England.

The Area Description built upon a range of national and regional evidence, local strategies and plans, and stakeholder engagement. Key stakeholders (including those in the Nature Partnership and Catchment Partnership) were also sent versions of the Area Description to ensure it comprehensively captured all relevant information to the subsequent development of priorities.

Step two: Identification of opportunities in matrix format

The Area Description, interpretation of existing evidence and strategies, and initial stakeholder engagement with communities and farmers was used to develop an initial matrix of opportunities for nature recovery, without reference to specific locations.

This matrix was iterated with the LNRS Steering Group (which led production of the Toolkit) and Nature Partnership Board (plus the Forestry Commission and National Landscapes) to ensure it included all relevant 'strategic' opportunities for nature recovery across the region.

Step three: Identification of opportunities in sub-areas

Building on the 'opportunities matrix' and description of sub-areas, we also began to draft potential opportunities that existed in each different parts of the West of England. This enabled us to work with stakeholders to ensure we had tested, at a broad level, where opportunities would be relevant across the region.

Step four: Longlisting of priorities and initial mapping of potential locations for delivery

Based on the Area Description and identified opportunities, input from stakeholder engagement on priorities for nature recovery, as well as a consideration of existing priorities in strategies such as the Forest of Avon Plan, Bristol Avon Catchment Plan, Bristol Avon Fish Recovery Strategy, and the Nature Recovery Plans for the Mendip an Cotswolds National Landscapes, we developed an initial longlist of priorities that could be relevant to the region and would be appropriate for the Toolkit.

It is worth emphasising that many of the plans and strategies expressing priorities that could be relevant to the LNRS were completed in the last few years, or months in some cases; it was very clearly voiced by stakeholders at the start of the process that the Toolkit should make use of these strategies and avoid repeating work that had already been done recently (through, e.g., the Forest of Avon Plan).

Therefore, while preparing the Toolkit needed to be done on its own terms, it was also essential that the LNRS wasn't about undoing evidence-based work that they had delivered. Rather it was about identifying the best and most useful outputs of those pieces of work and synthesizing it with a fresh consideration of priorities for nature recovery, led by the relevant regulations and guidance.

The consideration of nature recovery priorities drew on a wide range of evidence and views, picking up on the steer through the statutory guidance that a LNRS should recognise the need for priorities to be ambitious but also that measures need to reflect what is likely to be deliverable. Using a wide range of data (see Appendix V), stakeholder engagement, and existing projects/strategies, we also

began the process of mapping potential locations where the longlist of priorities could best be delivered.

The approach was set out for and agreed with the LNRS Steering group, Natural Environment Officer Steering Group, and West of England Nature Partnership, and checked with other key stakeholder such as the Catchment Partnership.

As explained later in this document, it was decided that a set of principles or criteria was needed to guide priority setting in order to ensure the right scope and coverage of key issues, interests, themes and opportunities, and to ensure that the priorities were sufficiently ambitious. Several options were considered, and it was concluded that forming a set of principles that echoed those in the Lawton review, the NE's principles for planning a nature network, and the 'Principles of Nature Recovery for the SW' was the best way forward.

Furthermore, it was recognised that beyond those principles, nature recovery is also dependent on changing mindsets and stopping or reducing harmful activities. Therefore, additional principles that would lead to the identification of supplementary priorities were discussed and agreed.

Finally, recognising that Statutory Guidance says little explicitly about nature recovery in urban areas, further discussion and workshops were held to establish principles and then priorities for nature recovery in the region's towns and cities.

Step five: Refinement of priorities

Based on stakeholder feedback from the LNRS Steering Group, Nature Partnership Board (plus the Forestry Commission and National Landscapes), the Bristol Avon Catchment Partnership, and one-to-one meetings with a range of stakeholders, we gradually refined the longlist of priorities to an agreed list that reflected the best opportunities to deliver nature recovery at scale across the region. This included dedicated workshops held in Autumn 2023.

Simultaneously, we refined the mapping based on continuing stakeholder engagement/feedback and the evolving list of priorities. The mapping was shared several times with key stakeholders and iterated accordingly to ensure it reflected the best opportunities to deliver the priorities for nature recovery.

Having established a broad level of consensus on the priorities, several different ways of grouping and categorising the priorities were first tested with the LNRS Steering Group, and subsequently with the Nature Partnership Board. The best supported option that emerged featured the key tenets of the Lawton principles 'bigger, better and more joined up'.

We also held a dedicated workshop with farmers and landholders where we shared the draft list of priorities (and related measures) and the mapping of Focus Areas for nature recovery for feedback. Key messages from the sector were positive on the priorities themselves and the balance between ambition and deliverability was underlined. The principle of having options to deliver measures according to what was possible on different parts of a holding was strongly supported.

Step six: Consultation

We intend to use the consultation as an opportunity for further meaningful engagement with a range of stakeholders on whether the priorities for nature recovery and mapped focus areas reflect the best opportunities for nature recovery across the region. Once this has been completed, an updated Toolkit will be produced to reflect feedback received in the consultation.

Principles

We know that not all action to restore nature is equal, and that we need to focus our resources and time in the areas where action will make the biggest difference, and where nature recovery is most realistic.

The following principles have been used to shape our approach to identifying opportunities and priorities for nature recovery, including the mapping of 'areas that could become of particular importance'. These have been informed by the Lawton Principles[1], Natural England's 'principles for planning a Nature Network'[2], and Principles of Nature Recovery Networks across the South West[3], in particular.

- **Working with nature**: What is possible in a given location will depend on a number of factors, including geology, topography, soils and climate. We need to make sure that any recommendations are realistic and feasible given these factors, while letting nature take the lead rather than being overly directive on exactly what needs to happen where.

- **Build from what we have**: our best sites for nature must be protected, appropriately managed, and buffered. However, it is not enough to restore our existing sites, which are often too small and isolated for nature to thrive. We need to build out from and connect these core sites to enable large-scale habitat restoration.

- **Bigger is better**: nature recovery is more effective at scale, and one 1,000ha nature site is better than ten 100ha sites. There is also a need to create 'Large Nature Areas' of 5,000 ha+, from which nature can spill out[2].

- **Connectivity is key**: connecting existing habitat through wildlife corridors and 'stepping stones' will enable wildlife to move through the landscape using ecological networks. This will also enable wildlife to adapt to climate change by moving to new 'climate spaces'. For instance, connecting two sites through habitat creation will have a disproportionately large impact by effectively creating one large habitat.

- **Nature recovery everywhere**: Action for nature can be taken anywhere and, at scale, can add up to change that will bring significant benefits to nature. Outside of areas that are a focus for nature recovery, the wider landscape should be made more hospitable to wildlife. This will also bring nature closer to people.

- **Nature as a solution**: restoring nature provides numerous opportunities to tackle other societal challenges. This includes sequestering carbon, providing natural flood management, improving water quality, increasing food security, and enhancing our health and wellbeing. Opportunities for such 'nature-based solutions' need to be considered when identifying opportunities, so that we are better able to bring in additional resources to restore nature while providing wider benefits to society.

- **Nature's place in the bigger picture**: There are other demands on land, including food production, space for people to live and work, renewable energy and recreation, which are also important. Nature recovery should enhance people's quality of live and reduce

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[1] Professor Sir John Lawton et al. (2010), Making Space for Nature
[2] Natural England (2020), Nature Networks Evidence Handbook
[3] South West Local Nature Partnerships (2019), Principles of Nature Recovery Networks across the South West

inequalities, and opportunities for nature recovery should be integrated into other land uses.

- **Looking at the national picture**: though this Strategy is limited in its geographical scope, we need to consider how nature in the area covered by the Toolkit forms part of the wider natural environment and highlight cross-boundary opportunities to restore nature. This has meant working closely with neighbouring LNRS regions (Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Somerset) and beyond.

- **The role of species**: the focus of this Strategy is on restoring ecosystems, which should benefit the widest range of species. However, there are certain rare and iconic species that require specialist consideration due to, for example, their scarcity, cultural value, reliance on ecological niches, or a particular vulnerability to the many pressures facing wildlife. Some species, such as beavers, are also 'ecosystem engineers' that have a particularly important role in restoring ecosystems.

- **Resilience and adaptability**: we are already seeing the impacts of a changing climate, and these impacts will continue to become more extreme over the coming years and decades. Ecosystems will need to be resilient to a changing climate to enable nature recovery in the long-term, and some ecosystems and species are more vulnerable than others. Therefore, we need to proactively plan for a changing climate when setting priorities for nature recovery, including prioritising actions that will lead to more resilient ecosystems and building connected ecosystems that enable species to move to a different climate space.

- **More than just land use**: Although the Nature Recovery Toolkit is focused on land use and management, improving the amount and quality of habitat is not sufficient to recover nature. We also need to reduce harmful pollution entering the environment and recognise where this is most necessary. We need to help people make positive choices for nature everywhere. This includes supporting farmers to reduce or phase out use of harmful pesticides and industrial fertilisers, investing in natural processes for water/resource management, and reducing the impact of pollution from e.g. transport and industry.

- **Use the best available evidence**: To effectively use the above principles, we need to use the best quality and most up-to-date evidence from a variety of sources. We also need to engage with stakeholders to supplement this evidence with crucial 'on the ground' knowledge.

Approach to built-up areas

A substantial proportion of the the area covered by the Toolkit is built-up, including urban areas, 'peri-urban' areas and towns. The presentation of written priorities and measures in built-up areas is set out below.

In our consideration of built-up areas, we have included the larger population centres of Greater Bristol, Bath and Weston-super-Mare, as well as towns with a population of 10,000 or more such as Yate, Thornbury, Portishead, Clevedon, Nailsea, Keynsham and Norton-Radstock.

Many of the measures for nature recovery that are important in these areas are different to those in the wider countryside. For example, private gardens, parks and street trees are crucial resources for wildlife in built-up areas that are less important in the wider countryside.

Additionally, users of the Nature Recovery Toolkit in urban areas will have different possibilities available to them for nature recovery. For example, many residents will be interested in how they can manage their private outdoor space (garden, balcony etc.), community groups may be interested in how they can manage public outdoor spaces such as parks, and the local authority can influence green infrastructure such as street trees and urban drainage systems.

Therefore, our approach has been to group together different spaces and land uses that have similar sets of measures for biodiversity.

We have identified the following four categories that, in the final version of the Toolkit, will be used organise the measures for nature recovery in built up areas:

1. **Nature in larger spaces (U1)**
   This covers larger areas of publicly and privately owned land, mostly parks and other green/open space. These might be places where off-site BNG could be delivered close to where losses occur. It includes:

   - Large public (and semi-public) green spaces and river corridors.

   - Parks, cemeteries and allotments.

   - Semi-public green spaces in schools, universities and hospitals.

   - Land used primarily for sports and amenity purposes such as golf courses and playing fields (recognising this is likely to remain the primary use).

   - Transport corridors for road, rail, cycling and walking, e.g. Bristol-Bath Cycle Path and Network Rail land alongside main rail routes.

   - Commercial/business sites with significant green/open space (e.g. Filton aerospace, Aztec West).

2. **Nature in development and regeneration (U2)**
   This category covers new and existing developments, where urban greening and nature-friendly measures can provide space for wildlife. The measures are relevant to new developments, in particular, but also for retrofitting existing developments where possible. It is also relevant to major regeneration frameworks and masterplans such as Temple Quarter in Bristol.

3. **Nature in streets (U3)**
   This category refers to opportunities in streets and roads in built-up areas. Measures include planting and managing street trees, and managing verges for wildlife, though biodiversity can also be incorporated through other planting opportunities. Additionally, there are opportunities for nature-based solutions such as sustainable urban drainage systems (SuDS) in streets and roads.

4. **Nature in gardens (U4)**
   Gardens and other private outdoor spaces are a large portion of many built-up areas and can be incredibly wildlife-rich when managed with nature in mind. There is a wealth of existing guidance to help people manage gardens for nature, which the Toolkit points to.

Additionally, river corridors in urban areas have been included in the mapping of 20 – 30m river buffers. These corridors have additional priorities, such as easing of river barriers and riparian habitat.

The final published version of the Toolkit will also point towards any relevant local strategies, action plans and community groups that can help to inform action for nature at the local level.

Evidence and data

<u>Existing Strategies and Plans</u>

We were fortunate to not be making a standing start locally, as a lot of work has already gone in to identifying opportunities and potential priorities for nature recovery. Through developing the Nature Recovery Toolkit, we have tried not to reinvent the wheel, and have built upon the following key pieces of work, among others:

- West of England Nature Recovery Network

- The Forest of Avon Plan: A Tree and Woodland Strategy for the West of England

- Bristol Avon Catchment Plan

- Bristol Avon Fish Recovery Strategy

- West of England Joint Green Infrastructure Strategy

- Local Green Infrastructure Strategies, and Parks and Open Spaces Strategies

- National Landscape (Cotswolds and Mendip Hills) Nature Recovery Plans

- Local Plans

- Action plans and strategies for nature-based programmes and projects.

These were all used to help inform an initial longlist of potential priorities for nature recovery.

'Appendix V: Evidence used in the development of the Nature Recovery Toolkit' provides further detail on how these strategies and projects were used in development of the Toolkit.

<u>Mapping and datasets</u>

We have used a wide range of local, regional and national evidence in preparing the Local Nature Recovery Toolkit.

'Appendix V: Evidence used in the development of the Nature Recovery Toolkit' lists all of the datasets that we have used to inform the Local Nature Recovery Toolkit and how they were used. A summary of how we have used some key datasets is provided below:

- Data on **designated sites** (both nationally and regionally designated for their value to nature), **priority habitats**, and the **National Forest Inventory** has been used to identify where there are habitats that are already of value to nature.

- Mapping of land that is in **Environmental Stewardship Schemes** has been used to help us understand where there is additional land that may already be of value to nature.

- **Species records** from BRERC have been used to identify where priority species have been recorded recently or in the past. This indicates where there is good-quality habitat or where

habitat restoration could help to recover certain species. This has been complemented by additional information where it is available, such as from the project to better understand Greater Horseshoe Bat populations locally.

- The **West of England Nature Recovery Network** mapping, complemented by Natural England's **National Habitats Networks**, **Cotswolds Ecological Network mapping** and **Buglife's B-Lines**, has been used to identify existing ecological networks and where the best opportunities are to connect these.

- We have used mapping of **Agricultural Land Classifications** (a measure of the productivity of land for agriculture) and **crop types** to understand existing land use and where the most productive agricultural areas are.

- Mapping of **soil types** and **flood zones**, as well as **opportunities for saltmarsh creation**, have been used to understand the potential habitats that could be created in different areas.

- Mapping of **topography** (gradient and height) has been used to identify land that is likely to be unproductive, as well as where opportunities might exist for nature-based solutions such as cross-slope planting.

- A variety of sources have been used to identify **opportunities for nature-based solutions**. This includes including mapping of: areas prone to flooding, opportunities for riparian woodland creation, priorities areas for natural flood management (NFM), classification of water bodies under the WFD, and local mapping of opportunities to improve water quality and provide NFM.

- The location of **river barriers**, mapping of **riparian vegetation**, and **reasons for waterbodies not achieving good ecological status under the WFD framework** have been used to help identify priorities for improving the ecological status of rivers.

- The location of **parks and green spaces**, the **green belt**, the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), and mapping of **access to green space** have been used to help identify areas where nature recovery could provide the most benefit to people's health and wellbeing.

- The location of **infrastructure**, including road and rail, has been used to identify where there may be barriers to ecological connectivity.

- Information on **landscape character areas**, the location of **sensitive landscapes** such as the Bath World Heritage Setting, and locations of **ancient monuments** and **historic sites** have been used to ensure identified opportunities are sensitive to culture and landscape.

Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement was crucial to ensuring that the Local Nature Recovery Toolkit reflects the priorities of people across the area covered by the Toolkit, and is realistic and achievable. This section provides a brief overview of the engagement that was undertaken in the development of the Toolkit.

All of this engagement was used to inform an initial longlist of potential priorities for nature recovery, and to refine these priorities into the agreed list for consultation.

Farmer and Landholder engagement

Farmers and landowners are critical to delivery of nature recovery and have unique knowledge of what would be deliverable and most impactful for nature on their land. Therefore, we have worked closely with farmer and landowner representatives and advisors, including the National Farmers' Union, Country Land and Business Association (CLA), and Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) South West, to engage farmers and landowners throughout the development of the Toolkit.

The engagement with this sector included:

- An introductory webinar aimed at farmers and landowners in April 2023.

- Three in-person events held between June and September 2023, where farmers and landowners were invited to provide their perspective on the most important and realistic priorities for nature, and how the Nature Recovery Toolkit could be designed to be as useful as possible for them.

- An online survey to complement the in-person events, enabling a wider audience to provide their thoughts on priorities and the design of the Toolkit.

- A workshop held in January 2024 on the draft priorities and mapping of areas 'that could become of particular importance' to enable us to get feedback on an early consultation draft of the Toolkit.

Business engagement

Businesses have an important role in nature recovery through investing in the natural environment and supporting nature around the workplace and in local communities.

The Bristol and Climate and Nature Partnership led the engagement with businesses. We wanted to understand businesses' priorities for investing in nature and how the Toolkit could help them. To do this, we held:

- A workshop in October 2023 where we discussed how businesses are seeking to support nature, how the Toolkit could help businesses do more, and what parts of the area covered by the Toolkit are priorities for businesses.

- One-to-one meetings with local businesses to better understand their perspective on nature recovery.

- A survey for businesses who were not able to attend the workshop or attend a one-to-one meeting.

Community Engagement

It is important that the Toolkit is informed by communities' priorities for and perspectives on nature recovery. This will help to ensure the Toolkit reflects local opportunities and priorities, and is useful for people across the area covered by the Toolkit.

Our community engagement has included:

- A survey held in August-September 2023, where we asked residents and community groups about their priorities for nature recovery and what they would find useful from the Toolkit. The survey received over 400 responses.

- An analysis of previous work on understanding local priorities for nature recovery, so that we made best use of existing information. For example, we looked at engagement that took place through the Festival of Nature and feedback from local projects such as Common Connections.

- We met with Bristol's Community Climate Action Panel to better understand how the Toolkit could be made relevant to different communities, particularly in urban areas.

The public consultation on this draft of the Toolkit is also an important part of our community engagement. In particular, we want to use the consultation to understand:

- if there are any other areas that could be mapped as a focus for nature recovery; and

- if the priorities and measures are useful for communities and community groups.

Additionally, we will be engaging on the design of the online portal on which the Toolkit will be hosted. This will help us to design a product that is useful for local communities.

Other key stakeholders

In developing the priorities and mapping, we have worked closely with organisations that have expertise and/or a particular stake in the Toolkit. This has helped us to develop priorities and map areas that are impactful and realistic.

The West of England Nature Partnership (WENP) Board brings together organisations working together to deliver more for nature's recovery locally. They have provided an important steer on the content of the Toolkit.

The Bristol Avon Catchment Partnership (BACP) Steering Group has also been key in helping us to understand priorities related to the freshwater environment, and how to integrate these into the Toolkit.

In addition to the organisations on the WENP Board and BACP Steering Group, we have worked closely with the Cotswolds and Mendip Hills National Landscapes, and the Forestry Commission.

We have also held numerous 1-to-1 conversations with other key stakeholders to understand their priorities for nature recovery. This has included national conservation organisations (e.g. Butterfly Conservation, Buglife), other local NGOs and charities (e.g. Bristol Zoological Society and CPRE Avon & Bristol), the Severn Estuary Partnership, the West of England Nature and Health Group, and many others.