YORKSHIRE DALES NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY **ITEM 5**

Date: **26 September 2023**

Report: **NATURE RECOVERY PLAN**

Purpose of the report

1. To seek member support for a Nature Recovery Plan for the Yorkshire Dales National Park.

RECOMMENDATION

2. It is recommended that the Authority:
    a. endorses the Nature Recovery Plan (**Annex B**) as the basis for influencing the Local Nature Recovery Strategies being prepared by the local authorities in the National Park;
    b. delegates officers to finalise and then publish the Plan; and,
    c. requests the Yorkshire Dales Biodiversity Forum to develop practical proposals for monitoring and reporting progress on the objectives.

Strategic Planning Framework

3. The information and recommendation contained in this report are consistent with the Authority's statutory purposes and its approved strategic planning framework, and in particular:
    - **National Park Management Plan 2019-2024**
      "By 2040 the Yorkshire Dales National Park will be home to the finest variety of wildlife in England".

Background

4. It is now widely recognised that the world is facing climate and biodiversity emergencies, which are inextricably linked. Nature is in decline across the globe. The Government's State of Nature Report (2019) revealed that 41% of the remaining UK species were in decline and more than one in ten were at risk of extinction.

5. The Government's 2023 Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) re-affirmed its commitment to "*a growing and resilient network of land, water and sea that is richer in plants and wildlife*". The aim is to create a UK 'Nature Recovery Network' "*to protect and restore wildlife, and provide opportunities to re-introduce species that we have lost from our countryside*". It is expected that the Nature Recovery Network will come about through linking the best existing wildlife sites (SSSIs), and creating or restoring 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat outside the SSSI network.

6. Central to the implementation of the EIP will be Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs). These are statutory documents that should identify the priority opportunities for habitat improvement and restoration in the strategy area. They will also map existing nature sites and habitats, and the priority locations for future habitat improvement and restoration. The National Park will be covered by three separate LNRSs – the production of which is being led by North Yorkshire Council, Westmorland and Furness Council, and Lancashire County Council (the 'Responsible Authorities'). The National Park Authority is formally designated as a 'Supporting Authority' and must, therefore, be involved in producing and agreeing the strategies.

7. In anticipation of these initiatives, the Authority resolved in March 2021 to work in partnership with the Yorkshire Dales Biodiversity Forum (see **Annex A**) - and with the involvement of the Dales Farming & Land Management Forum - to prepare a 'Nature Recovery Plan' for the National Park. It was intended the Nature Recovery Plan would replace the previous Biodiversity Action Plan, which guided work on nature conservation up to 2020, and that it would be used to influence the emerging LNRSs covering the National Park.

8. An initial draft Nature Recovery Plan was considered by the Authority in June last year. Members resolved to refine and publish the final Plan by June 2023. In December 2022, Members considered a report on progress in preparing a list of priority species for inclusion in the Plan. Members endorsed the approach that was being taken to compile the list using recent data from the three county biological records centres and consulting local species experts.

9. Authority Members were consulted by the Member Champion for Natural Environment on a further draft of the Plan in August. The current draft has benefitted from feedback from Mr Corner, Mr Neil Heseltine and Mrs Bushby.

10. In total, there have been three rounds of consultation with individuals and organisations on the National Park's three land management advisory forums. In addition, in February 2023 three events were held for groups of farmers during which the draft Plan was presented and comments invited.

The importance of the Yorkshire Dales National Park

11. The Yorkshire Dales National Park will form a vital part of the Nature Recovery Network in England:

    a. It contains the finest limestone scenery in the UK supporting a multitude of rare and special plants and animals. The 'typical' dales pattern of heather-clad hillsides, marshy in-by land and farmed valleys with hay meadows, drystone walls and barns is not only an internationally-important cultural landscape, it is also contains an abundance of rare species. The fells and moorland fringes support internationally important upland bird populations & provide a vital carbon sink. In total, the National Park contains 17 nationally important 'Priority Habitats', covering 83,000 hectares – the most of any English National Park. Over 25% of the National Park (57,000 ha) is formally designated as nationally or internationally important for wildlife – again, the most of any English National Park.

b. It contains almost 400 species that are of UK conservation importance. Among these are iconic species such as Red Squirrel, Lady's Slipper Orchid and Curlew. However, the species list also contains less well-known ones - like the Yorkshire Feather-moss (which occurs in the National Park and nowhere else) – which live here in nationally and, in some cases, internationally important populations.

12. The sheer extent of the wildlife described above - a result of the relatively less-intensive farming systems here - means that this is one of the least fragmented areas of semi-natural habitat in the country. However, whilst the areas of habitat are relatively well-connected, many of them are no longer in the best condition. Only 30% of the SSSIs are in favourable condition, and the last Trends and Status showed wider declines in the condition of several habitat types since 2010. Similarly, the condition of priority species is also declining overall – despite individual success stories for species like Red Squirrel and Dormice. There is a pressing need to improve the condition of habitats, and reconnect them where they are fragmenting, through large-scale programmes of restoration of peatlands, woodlands, grasslands and watercourses.

A Nature Recovery Plan for the Yorkshire Dales National Park

13. The main text of the Nature Recovery Plan is at **Annex B**. The Plan sets out:

    a. a clear vision for what nature recovery will look like 'on the ground' in each of the five main 'landscape types' in the National Park (limestone country; moorland; valleys; freshwater; and, woodland).

    b. a set of specific, measurable objectives for the levels of habitat restoration and creation that will be needed to make meaningful progress towards that vision;

    c. a list of almost 400 important species present in the National Park for which conservation action is needed, and measurable objectives for a number of these key species or species groups.

    d. a number of under-pinning policies and principles, including a 'position statement' on grazing that emphasises the importance of retaining and expanding the use of 'very low-input' farming systems to maintain and enhance many of the distinctive habitats for which the Dales is famous.

14. Overall, the Plan includes objectives to:

    a. Create or restore over 20,000 ha of important habitats;

    b. Protect or enhance 1,000 km of rivers; and,

    c. Create or restore 250 km of species-rich hedgerows

15. Members will see that, while the document is substantially complete, there are still some final details that need to be added - references, statistics, examples and the maps showing the current distribution of habitats (Annex E). Because of the size of the files, the latter have been put on the Authority's website at https://www.yorkshiredales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2023/09/Nature-Recovery-Plan-Maps.pdf, should Members wish to see them.

Next steps

16. Subject to Members' views, the final tasks outlined in paragraph 16 will be done in time to publish the Plan on-line before the end of the year. This will include a free-standing Executive Summary to promote wider awareness of the key elements of the Plan;

17. If approved today, the Plan will be used immediately to:

    a. inform and shape the content of the three Local Nature Recovery Strategies that will cover the National Park. Subject to final negotiations with the Responsible Authorities over resourcing, YDNPA officers will assist directly in the preparation of these Strategies. These strategies will guide the allocation of resources from a range of public and private sources, including the Government's Environmental Land Management schemes and Biodiversity Net Gain from new development;

    b. inform negotiations with Government over the setting – and subsequent implementation/funding - of national nature recovery targets for each Protected Landscape.

    c. encourage other organisations to direct their resources towards helping to achieve the targets and objectives of the Plan. The Yorkshire Dales Biodiversity Forum can play an important role in coordinating this and making sure that targets are met.

    d. guide the allocation of Authority funding – not least the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme;

    e. form the basis for direct bids for additional funding from public, private and charitable sources.

Conclusion

18. The Yorkshire Dales National Park is home to many habitats and species of animals and plants that have suffered significant declines elsewhere. However, it is now widely acknowledged that just slowing down the decline in nature is nowhere near enough. We need a 'step change' in conservation practice, one that emphasises landscape-scale action as opposed to one based simply on just protecting sites or focussing on single species.

19. Through the National Park Management Plan, all the key partners – including representatives of farming and landowners - have already committed to the ambition of making the Yorkshire Dales "home to the finest variety of wildlife in England" by 2040. The Nature Recovery Plan puts flesh on the bones of that ambition, sets specific, measurable objectives, and points towards some ways by which they could be achieved. Notwithstanding the clarity of vision and purpose, it goes without saying that the objectives can only be achieved if there is a commensurate 'step change' in the resources available to farmers and land managers to create viable farm businesses that can deliver for nature.

Tony Serjeant
Senior Wildlife Conservation Officer

14 September 2023

Members of Yorkshire Dales Biodiversity Forum

Representative	***Organisation***
Peter Welsh (Chair)	Independent
Graham Jackson-Pitt	Cumbria Wildlife Trust
Kathryn Lillistone	Environment Agency
Nancy Steadman	Friends of the Dales
John Lamb	Lancashire Wildlife Trust
Steve Carver	Leeds University
Elizabeth Sullivan	National Trust
Ann Readshaw	Natural England
Chris Jones	RSPB
Chris Alder	Upper Wharfedale Field Society
Gordon Haycock	Wharfedale Naturalists
Prof. Jonathan Grey	Wild Trout Trust
Jack Hirst	Woodland Trust
Ken Readshaw	Yoredale Natural History Society
Mark Corner	Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority
Catherine Mercer	Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust
Marie Taylor	Yorkshire Dales Rivers Trust
Rosie Snowden	Yorkshire Peat Partnership
Graham Standring	Yorkshire Wildlife Trust