Dorset Local Nature Partnership – written evidence (NER0059)

1. I am writing in response to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 Call for Evidence on behalf of the Dorset Local Nature Partnership (DLNP).

2. The DLNP was established in 2012 as one of the 47 Defra approved Local Nature Partnership’s with a role to:
   - Provide leadership for those working to protect and enhance the environment in Dorset
   - Advocate the good management of Dorset’s natural environment for its own sake and the many benefits it offers
   - Articulate the importance of Dorset’s natural environment to economic and social wellbeing
   - Ensure that the natural environment is taken into account in policy and decision-making

3. DLNP has six strategic priorities:
   - Natural capital – investing in Dorset’s natural assets
   - Natural value – adding value to the local economy
   - Natural health – developing Dorset’s ‘natural health service’
   - Natural resilience – improving environmental and community resilience
   - Natural understanding – improving understanding of, and engagement in, Dorset’s environment
   - Natural influence – integrating natural value in policy and decision-making, locally and beyond

Rural advocacy and the Commission for Rural Communities

4. Since the closure of the Commission for Rural Communities there has been some loss of focus on rural issues. For example Local Enterprise Partnerships are largely focused on urban growth which has been a concern for the Dorset Rural Enterprise Group, a sub group of the Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership. The issue has been raised and noted by the South West LEPs who collectively organised a ‘Rural Productivity Commission’ which is due to report shortly.

Natural England

5. It is recognised that Natural England, along with all public sectors organisations, has had considerable reduction to their budget.

6. One significant issue with this is the ending of the Memoranda of Agreements (MoA) with Local Environmental Record Centres (LERCs). The Dorset Environmental Records Centre (DERC) is a charity which collects, collates and manages information on Dorset’s natural environment. DERC supports and works with a range of experts to ensure information collected is robust, and makes information accessible to a range of
audiences including decision-makers, developers, researchers, community groups and the public. They provide the crucial local support and record verification for the many local wildlife recorders, who entrust and share their data. This support for local recorders, and validation of their records, would not be possible without DERC.

7. Natural England’s ending of the MoAs with LERCs in favour of open data investment, leaves a question over how it can fulfil its legal responsibilities under the NERC biodiversity duty\(^1\) and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981; and the validity of the evidence on which it bases its decision making. The Environment Agency has recognised that this local data remains vital in delivering its duties and has continued to support its agreements with DERC. The vast majority of data managed by DERC is, once validated, added to open source platforms like the NBN Atlas, but some datasets, for example, Local Wildlife Sites\(^2\) (known in Dorset as Sites of Nature Conservation Interest or SNCIs) are held, managed and updated locally by the SNCI partnership and DERC, with the data not accessible through the NBN (because the majority of sites are privately owned). This information is vital for local decisions, both on planning matters and on agri-environment schemes, and yet it is currently not used by Natural England.

8. It should be noted that in Dorset we have experienced and dedicated Natural England staff working on planning, which we understand is not the case in many other areas. We suggest that Dorset provides a model of best practice for this area of Natural England’s work. One example of good practice in Dorset is the St Leonards Hospital Site Development, a sensitive site that with support from stakeholders including Natural England, Dorset Wildlife Trust, has led to biodiversity gain. The work has been highlighted nationally by The Wildlife Trusts as an example of good practice. A case study on the St Leonards Hospital Site Development is available at: www.dorsetlnp.org.uk/hres/Case-Study-St-Leonards.pdf.

9. Government needs expert, independent advice on the natural environment and clarity is needed about what advice Natural England can give. If Natural England are not permitted to issue advice on policy or guidelines on its implementation, this leaves a vacuum which Defra are not in our experience adequately filling.

10. Linked to this point, planning committees, inspectors and judges look to Natural England’s advice to help them decide cases, and the absence of a Natural England view is seen as lack of biodiversity importance, despite any NGO or community representations. Therefore it is crucial that Natural England have sufficient resources to be able to engage with important decisions that affect our local biodiversity.

11. Natural England locally also provide support for farmers and landowners to enter into agri-environment schemes. Our experience has been that local staff have been as supportive as they can be given the circumstances that the schemes and their management and administration have presented.

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\(^1\) Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006
\(^2\) TWT (2016) [Local Wildlife Sites](https://www.dorsetlnp.org.uk/hres/Case-Study-St-Leonards.pdf)
12. In 2014 Local Nature Partnerships were asked to help Natural England in facilitating local targeting for what became the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. As champions for the natural environment, LNPs are ideally placed to provide the local expertise required to ensure that such schemes are able to make a significant contribution to achieving national and local targets. However there were significant problems encountered in the process, so much so that Dorset LNP, alongside many others, wrote to Defra to highlight the concerns around the data used and its interpretation by Natural England. Our experience was that the local Natural England team working on this exercise were so constrained by the national requirements, that they were unable to apply any flexibility, and that what ‘consultation’ there was with Dorset stakeholders on targeting was only around the periphery of the detail, with no meaningful local steer possible.

Sustainability and biodiversity

13. Local authorities have suffered from huge budget cuts in recent years, resulting in several Dorset local authorities without ecological expertise in house. As a result, the ‘due regard’ requirement is not strategically integrated through local authorities’ remit and business.

14. The biodiversity duty is most generally understood and acted on within countryside services (where these still exist) and/or planning departments. There is often very limited awareness in other departments which have important impacts on biodiversity including property, transport and education.

15. Within Dorset there are good links with health and wellbeing. This includes the Health and Wellbeing Boards – one for Dorset and another for Bournemouth and Poole – and the Dorset (including Bournemouth and Poole) Sustainability and Transformation Plan (STP). The Dorset STP is one of the few (if not only) STP which includes a specific priority on healthy places (which includes green infrastructure with both enhancements for wildlife and access to nature for recreation).

16. All of Dorset’s local authorities do have Service Level Agreements with Dorset Environmental Record Centres (DERC) giving them access to the data they need to ‘have regard’ during decision making.

17. The NERC duty is seen primarily as a Defra objective, and within that as a Natural England objective. Examples where other parts of Defra and other Government departments have not been consistent with the duty include:

   a. The Forestry Commission still sometimes give grant aid to tree planning on sites which already have high biodiversity value, such as unimproved grassland, thus causing the destruction of these habitats. For example in 2011 (after the NERC Duty applied), they awarded England Woodland Grant Scheme funding which included tree planting that resulted in the loss of 1.1ha of unimproved grassland in two Local Wildlife Sites (SNCIs) in Dorset. The landowner might have chosen

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3 Letter from Suzanne Goodfellow (Chair, Natural Devon), to Lord De Mauley, Defra, 7th August 2014.
to plant trees without a grant, but public money should not have been awarded that sanctioned this loss of habitat.

b. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (and formerly Department for Business, Innovation & Skills) allocates substantial public funding to Local Enterprise Partnerships but the priority is for growth with little or no mention within guidance to have any regard to biodiversity. There is no funding allocated to Local Nature Partnerships.

c. The National Wildlife Crime Unit, part funded by the Home Office currently only has committed funding until 2020. Within Dorset there is support for this work from Dorset Police with a dedicated Rural Crime Team which includes wildlife crime. Longer term funding needs to be committed to the National Wildlife Crime Unit to demonstrate the value and support local work.

18. The NERC Duty must be recognised as important by all Government departments and integrated with all policies. The 25 Year Environment Plan being produced by Defra could be an opportunity to integrate the duty into decision making for all Government departments.

The changing context since 2006

19. There is no doubt that Brexit represents a watershed moment for the UK’s agriculture, environment and wildlife. There are real risks of losing the beneficial aspects of the current legislative and grant funding framework (including European grants not least through the Common Agricultural Policy) but also major opportunities to establish an agri-environment policy which improves on the best of the current system whilst learning lessons from the pitfalls that have been encountered. A long term approach is required which recognises the value of the natural environment to the wider economy and health and wellbeing. For example:

- Wildflower areas supporting pollination – the value of honey bees is reported to be worth £200 million a year⁴.
- Natural flood management schemes such as tree planting and floodplain meadows and alternative farming practices reduce the flow of water reducing flooding downstream supporting both businesses and residents.
- Physical activity in natural environments, or ‘green exercise’, is estimated to provide health benefits of £2.2 billion a year⁵.

20. It is essential that EU laws are transposed into UK law and that environmental protections are enhanced rather than weakened. A YouGov poll in August 2016⁶ for Friends of the Earth demonstrated high levels of support for maintaining or improving current levels of environmental protection: overall, 83% of people said Britain should pass new laws providing better (46%) or the same (37%) protection for wild areas and wildlife as current EU laws, with only 4% wanting lower protection.

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⁵ www.exeter.ac.uk/news/featurednews/title_543531_en.html
21. In 2012 The Natural Environment White Paper *The natural choice: securing the value of nature* set out the formation of Local Nature Partnerships ‘to enable local areas to work in a joined up and strategic way to help manage the natural environment to produce multiple benefits for people, the economy and the environment’. These partnerships were endorsed by Defra but limited support from the department has been forthcoming. The LNP network gives Defra geographically based partnerships with a wide range of expertise and experience to help the department to deliver its priorities and yet it does not appear to make best use of them.

22. In response to an Environmental Audit Committee review of LNPs in 2016\(^7\), Defra stated\(^8\) that the recommendations would be addressed through the 25 Year Plan for the Environment, which is yet to be published.

23. Dorset LNP is a strong partnership and is working with both the Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership and the Health and Wellbeing Boards for the area and is making good progress in influencing decision making by demonstrating the value of natural capital to the economy and nature based health and wellbeing but greater support from Defra and other departments would support further work in Dorset and enhanced work in other parts of the country where LNPs are less successful.

If you have any queries about this submission of evidence please contact the Dorset LNP Manager at the details above.

Yours faithfully

Simon Cripps  
Chair – Dorset Local Nature Partnership  

11 September 2017

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\(^7\) [https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmenvaud/858/85802.htm](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmenvaud/858/85802.htm)  

\(^8\) [https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmenvaud/377/37704.htm](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmenvaud/377/37704.htm)