
Local Nature Partnerships – the experience in Sussex

Nearly 50 Local Nature Partnerships now operate throughout England. Can these new bodies bring a collective effort to help change the fortunes of our wildlife, and will they embed nature conservation in the actions of their members? Reflecting on experience in Sussex, this article considers the early challenges facing LNPs and considers the tools required to make them a lasting force.

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In 2011 the government published its Natural Environment White Paper (NEWP), something that was broadly welcomed by the environmental Non-Government Organisations (NGOs). It contained a lot of background that the Wildlife Trusts, and others, had been promoting, such as the Lawton report on Britain's ecological network and the influential National Ecosystem Assessment, and it contained commitments that seemed to be heading in the right direction.

Time will tell whether the broad trajectory set by the NEWP will be maintained, and at present it seems that government policy is not living up to its earlier environmental promise. Nevertheless, one of the commitments made in the NEWP was to encourage the establishment of Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) around the country. At present, 48 are established with most of England covered at county or similar level, and many LNPs have been in place for a couple of years.

Partnerships in practice

The name may be misleading. 'Local'? Well, they tend to cover areas about the size of a county, so they are not that local, and 'Nature'? In fact they cover far more than just nature, addressing health and wellbeing issues in relation to the environment for example. But at least the 'Partnership' part is right. However, from what I've seen they appear to be developing in ways that are appropriate for the area that they aim to cover so, whatever the name, these appear to be good initiatives.

Whilst there are common issues, the experience of developing a LNP is probably different in each area, but I will say a little here about the situation with the Sussex LNP, which I currently chair – just one example, but probably not an unusual one.

To kick-off we attracted a small amount of government funding to run a consultation to see what sort of LNP might be right for Sussex. Around 120 organisations (including many community groups) contributed and there was a great deal of agreement that some form of body to bring the environmental agenda together for the county would be worth while. The Defra aim seemed to be for a strategic body, but local opinion favoured something a little more practical – so linking these two

opposites seemed the first challenge! Even if people were not familiar with the term “ecosystem services”, the wide value of nature and the way it underpins everything appeared to be common currency to most people.

A modern structure for understanding nature?

Following consultation the pre-existing Sussex Biodiversity Partnership developed a bid to become a LNP which was later accepted by Defra in 2010.

Our LNP, and the make-up of its executive committee, therefore follows an ecosystem services structure. So, for example, ‘provisioning services’ are represented by landowners, farmers, forestry groups and the like, while ‘regulating services’ are represented by the Environment Agency, local authorities and others. In practice, however, whatever structure is developed, a sound partnership relies on attracting good people to the table and this is what seems to have happened.

In Sussex the Executive Committee is rather non-traditional. It is formed in such a way as to encourage conversations and interactions to promote the emergence of ideas, thoughts and interactions which will then lead to actions. The strategy is therefore based on ground-up emergence rather than top-down governance. As a consequence the Executive Committee is a large group consisting of individuals working at a high strategic level, who are committed to the LNP vision and aim to generate fruitful interaction.

The text books will tell you that a sharp committee should contain 10 or fewer people. The practice in Sussex, however, is that we have a board of over 20, and it is likely to grow! I believe this is a strength not a weakness – it is an “emergence” structure to enable progress towards unpredictable objectives rather than a “governance” structure that drives progress towards predictable ones. This benefits by having more good people in the discussion. See Giles Hutchins’ *Nature of Business* published by Green Books in 2012 for an excellent discussion on the benefits of emergence approaches.

This structure therefore helps us progress towards unpredictable outcomes. In Sussex one example of this was the establishment of a marine and coastal sub-group. This has brought together pre-existing but disparate groups so people who were working separately are now starting to share information and best practice. We are also in the process of preparing advice notes on planning. Hard-pressed Local Authorities, who may not have environmental expertise, need a quick way in to making sure that the environmental agenda is covered. A LNP advice note, which consists mainly of questions to be answered, should give them a head-start in making sure they live up to their responsibilities. So far most of our activities have been fairly strategic. I am aware, however, that many LNPs have been able to bring several groups together to draw in funding and implement some direct practical projects on the ground.

Nature’s wealth – do we all agree?

Funding and therefore capacity is a major problem probably for all LNPs. So far there is no LNP Officer in Sussex; work is being delivered by those who can fit it in to already



full day-jobs. Other organisations, such as Local Authorities and Local Enterprise Partnership, have a duty to collaborate with LNPs; there has been relatively little of this so far although I’m not sure that some LNPs could cope if all LAs and LEPs consulted them on their strategic plans at once.

Funding for capacity is therefore the critical issue for most LNPs, simply having someone on the ground will achieve a great deal. Other tools are improving – such as the LAs and LEPs duty to co-operate. New tools in development should also make a big difference – for instance tools are becoming available to improve the way the value of ecosystem services is incorporated into local economic plans.

As with any partnership, gaining agreement between partners, each representing very different organisations, can be difficult. We will try to overcome this in Sussex by working at a high strategic level rather than by making detailed comments. In practice this should be quite powerful.

The key guiding principle behind the LNP is its vision which is: “to work across all sectors and organisations to secure the healthiest ecological system possible thereby protecting and enhancing the natural environment and all that it gives us”.

This wording is very deliberate and sets the scene for the LNP’s objectives. These are simple yet fundamental:

- *to deliver growth in natural capital; and*
- *to ensure that Sussex residents share in the benefits provided by healthy, well-functioning ecosystems.*

Any advice, statement or response from the LNP will therefore be consistent with these objectives. So, for example, a LNP response to a strategic plan will ask two basic questions: does it deliver growth in natural capital and does it improve the benefits provided by healthy well-functioning ecosystems?

At this point there may be some divergence between LNPs. Most are making the link between the economy and the environment and most are arguing that the

environment underpins the economy. Many are therefore justifying the environment in terms of its economic benefits. Whilst this may be important in short term discussions, in the long term it is far more important that it is the economy that is re-shaped to better reflect environmental realities. A local economy must deliver growth in natural capital; otherwise it is not delivering “growth” at all.

This line of reasoning is closely aligned to the “Forum for the Future” 5 capitals model. At present growth is traditionally measured in terms of growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – essentially a turnover measure. In practice people do not measure their prosperity in terms of turnover. They may, however, measure it in terms of their stock of capital (crudely – the amount of “stuff” they have). Capital, in turn, falls into 5 categories: natural capital, human capital, social capital, manufactured capital and financial capital. Clearly these are all linked, but they are all reliant on natural capital. So, natural capital has primacy. No growth in natural capital means no growth. In this respect we are still trying to emerge from a recession that has lasted well over 100 years (not merely since 2008).

I am not sure how much the LNPs will engage in these more fundamental discussions. On the one hand LNPs were set up by government and confirmed by Defra, so would seem to be the government’s creatures. And there also seems to be an unspoken sub-plot that the LNPs should be unlocking development and economic growth by overcoming environmental constraints. On the other hand there has been virtually no guidance on what a LNP should be, no government funding to deliver them (so no ‘carrot’) and government was very clear that it wanted areas to set up bodies that were appropriate to the location. Therefore government should not be surprised if, having promoted the establishment of environmental partnerships, that is exactly what they get. So in my view it should be the other way around – LNPs should be overcoming development and economic constraints in order to unlock growth in natural capital.

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