

What next for Nature Improvement Areas?

Over eighty representatives from government, NGO's, local authorities, National Parks, AONBs and LNPs all working with Nature Improvement Areas met in London on 23rd February 2016 to look at the success of the three year NE/Defra funded programme and to determine what next for Nature Improvement Areas and landscape scale delivery in England. In addition to this review the day provided an excellent opportunity via a workshop session to feed in the NIA experience to help inform the government's 25 Year Plan for the Environment. The event also provided a platform to highlight the achievements in the recently published [Monitoring and Evaluation Report](#) and delivery successes to date.



Kim Martin of Defra welcomed attendees and highlighted the success of the 12 NIAs over the three years of the funded programme. Brian McDonald, Natural England, outlined the commitments made in 2011 and the ambition for landscape scale delivery outlined in the Natural Environment White Paper, Biodiversity 2020 and the delivery successes of the NIA programme to date ([Presentation 1](#)).



Prof. Sir John Lawton, who led the review of England's Wildlife Sites and Ecological Network – Making Space for Nature (2010), detailed the ambition behind NIAs, ecological restoration and a range of important recommendations MSfN highlighted ([Presentation 2](#)). In addition to this historical sweep, Sir John drew attention to the rapid increase in extreme weather events, in particular the recent floods in Yorkshire and preliminary estimates of costs in this one county of over £1.3bn, and that floods of 2000, 2007, and

2015 were all 1 in 200-1000 year events... The upland saturation and intense concentration of rainfall was made worse by overgrazing, excessive heather burning, deforestation and dredging of ditches to increase the rate of run off as a result of inappropriate land management as also downstream with terrible impacts on urban areas from the flooding. The need to move towards catchment scale management that works with nature has never been so apparent, nor its need been greater. A number of examples were cited as positive steps towards what needs to be done to manage the uplands to improve nature, provide multiple benefits for farmers as well as nature, and aid flood protection in downstream urban areas, as Sir John said ...'it's not rocket science' - the current review of flood resilience needs to focus on this for a meaningful response to protecting the citizens and economy of our country. NIAs and other integrated landscape scale approaches can provide a model to show how more, bigger, better and joined approaches can lead to increased resilience for people, places and to restore nature on an inspirational scale – Sir John concluded by thanking attendees indicating they should be proud to be part of something new, big and getting bigger.

Eleven of the twelve initial NIAs provided a series of short presentations detailing what they have done since funding ended in 2015. All twelve NIAs have continued to maintain direction and delivery ambition with eleven representatives stepping up to update and highlight how they are meeting the challenge of maintaining delivery to 2020.

- Birmingham & the Black Country ([Presentation 3a](#))
- The Dark Peak ([Presentation 3b](#))
- Dearne Valley Green Heart ([Presentation 3c](#))
- Greater Thames Marshes
- Humberhead levels ([Presentation 3d](#))
- Meres & Mosses of the Marches ([Presentation 3e](#))
- Morecambe Bay Limestones & Wetlands ([Presentation 3f](#))
- Nene Valley ([Presentation 3g](#))
- Northern Devon ([Presentation 3h](#))
- South Downs Way Ahead ([Presentation 3i](#))
- Wild Purbeck ([Presentation 3j](#))

NE's Nick White highlighted the success of the Highways England £300 million fund for Biodiversity which contains a commitment to support the ambitions of the NIAs as well as other important actions ([Presentation 4a](#)). Amanda Gregory of the JNCC highlighted further opportunities with EU Life funding ([Presentation 4b](#)).

The afternoon session was about the future. Defra's Nick Barter, who leads on the development of the twenty five year plan, introduced this session ([Presentation 5](#)) and outlined the three key points for attendees to address - *What are the most important ingredients of a successful NIA? What do you need to maximise your contribution to the plan and what are the enablers and barriers to this? What are the 3 biggest things you'd like to see feature in the 25 year environment plan?* The outputs of this workshop will be used by Defra to help shape development of the 25 year plan and will be made available in due course.

Following the workshop session NE's Rebecca Jackson-Pitt presented the lessons learned from the NIA monitoring approach and outlined the potential for development of a framework for voluntary reporting as a unifying tool for landscape scale partnerships working to integrated objectives. This includes the need to capture the value added by working at the landscape scale as well as integrated delivery outputs themselves ([Presentation 6](#)).

EA and FC provided a view of how they felt the NIA programme had worked from their perspective, FC's Neil Riddle said the NIAs were ... *'one of the first such initiatives where the Defra family have worked together effectively'*. ([Presentation 8](#)).

EA's Andrea Shaftoe highlighted the great work done across all NIAs water management with better communication and integrated delivery/multiple benefits being strengthened as a result of the Nature Improvement Area programme ([Presentation 7](#))

Brian McDonald ended the day highlighting the clear need to maintain direction, share best practise and have effective monitoring. In addition to the twelve NIAs, the locally determined NIAs and LNPs keen to identify further NIAs the approach has taken root. The momentum generated and lessons learned are too valuable to be dismissed, the opportunity for NIAs to

help inform the Government's 25 Year Plan illustrate how effective the three year NIA programme has been, delivering and setting the direction for the step change in nature conservation we need.

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