

A person is crouching on a dark, pebbly beach, holding two seashells in their hands. They are wearing a red and blue plaid shirt, a red and white plaid skirt, and red sneakers with white laces. The background shows the ocean and a cloudy sky.

# Evaluation of a public dialogue on the UK National Ecosystem Assessment

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# Executive Summary

This report presents the evaluation of a public dialogue project on the UK National Ecosystems Assessment (NEA) concepts and findings. The project was delivered by the University of Exeter and run in partnership with Defra and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), with support from Sciencewise<sup>1</sup>.

The NEA, published in 2011, drew together a wealth of scientific evidence on the character, causes and consequences of ecosystem change in the UK. The NEA process identified a number of key uncertainties in its evidence base and the mechanisms and means by which NEA science can be translated into policy and decision making. The Government therefore supported a two-year NEA follow-on (NEA-FO) phase.

The purpose of the public dialogue project was to open up the methods, analyses and findings of the NEA (and NEA-FO) process to public scrutiny: inspecting and testing its assumptions; highlighting potential areas of public sensitivity and concern; and offering public insight into the ways in which NEA thinking might help inform credible policy and practice toward the environment. By exposing the reasoning and work of the UK NEA to broad citizen scrutiny, the intention was that policy development processes would be better placed to understand where risks and opportunities associated with the use of NEA science lie.

Three key focus areas formed the basis of the dialogue:

- *The NEA's characterisation of the natural environment.* The dialogue aimed to consider whether the guiding logic of the NEA resonated with the public in terms of its characterisation of the natural environment (e.g. ecosystems representing 'natural capital' that provide a flow of 'services' influencing human well-being) and how it is understood to be changing for better or worse.
- *Applications of NEA concepts and approaches to decision making.* Set within the NEA's broad advocacy of the Ecosystem Approach to decision making, the dialogue considered practical applications of NEA thinking to reflect on what constitutes acceptable, necessary, practical and accountable approaches to ecosystem management.
- *Evaluating NEA futures and response options.* The dialogue explored how the public thought about the future of UK ecosystems. By exploring the plausibility and desirability of NEA scenarios the dialogue explored the long term trends, issues, risks and uncertainties anticipated by the public and what types of arrangements and interventions will be necessary to act upon and secure ecosystem futures in a desirable way.

The dialogue events took place between March and September 2014 and were divided into two key stages. Stage 1 involved one-day regional dialogue events held in Birmingham, Exeter and Glasgow. Each group of about 40 participants met three times in each location between March and June 2014 (i.e. 9 dialogue events in total) at which participants and specialists explored and discussed the three key areas of dialogue. The locations were chosen to capture different regional contexts. Stage two involved a national dialogue event held in London in

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<sup>1</sup> Sciencewise is the UK's national centre for public dialogue for policy making involving science and technology issues, and is funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). See [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk)



September 2014. This involved reconvening a subsample of 33 participants at a one-and-a-half day event to discuss and evaluate further some of the implications of the NEA for policy development and decision making.

In terms of methodology of all events, the project team kept a record of proceedings in the form of audio recordings, flip charts, posters, postcards, and questionnaires. There was also a project blog where participants could share thoughts. A video recording of the process formed the basis for a dialogue video. Group discussions were recorded and transcribed in full by an independent transcription company. Written records from discussion groups were summarised and converted to Word files. Electronic and written questionnaires were converted into spreadsheet documents. The transcripts were reviewed and coded, and grouped against dialogue themes using qualitative data analysis software (Nvivo) and sometimes manually. Significantly, throughout the final public dialogue report the authors indicate when views are commonly held and sustained across the dialogue while using multiple quotes to draw out and differentiate views around salient points. The Final Dialogue Report of the project was published in June 2015 and can be downloaded at [www.valuing-nature.net/naturally-speaking](http://www.valuing-nature.net/naturally-speaking)

The University of Exeter was responsible for the design of the dialogue events, producing the stimulus materials, the delivery and lead facilitation of the events as well as analysis and reporting. A project management group (with representatives from University of Exeter, NERC, Sciencewise and Defra) and a project advisory group (with representatives from Natural England, Defra, NERC, Sciencewise, NEA and RSPB) formed an overall oversight group that met 6 times over the course of the project. The University of Exeter subcontracted Hopkins van Mil to recruit participants and provide support facilitation at the dialogue events. Hopkins van Mil subcontracted the recruitment of participants to a further company.

The total project cost was £335,901 which included an award of £318,301 from Sciencewise to NERC to fund the dialogue. Further funding to support the production of dialogue materials (animations) and to enhance impact (notably short films) was secured from the NERC Impact Accelerator Account (£10,600) plus funding by the University of Exeter (£7,000); a total of an additional £17,600. Part-funding of the equivalent of £516,000 was provided through the follow-on phase of the UK NEA, especially work packages particularly relevant to the public dialogue exercise. Following a targeted call to undertake the dialogue, the University of Exeter, led by Dr. Rob Fish (Principal Investigator) was awarded the NERC grant of £318,301 to run the public dialogue project (award number NE/L013894/1).

Following a call to tender, 3KQ were commissioned by the University of Exeter in January 2014 to undertake an independent evaluation of the dialogue project (total cost £24,998 plus VAT). The final evaluation plan was agreed with the University of Exeter and Sciencewise in March 2014 following a baseline assessment report. The independent evaluation was undertaken to assess the quality and value of the process, the overall experience and satisfaction of participants, credibility, governance, costs and benefits, dissemination and impact, lessons and conclusions.

Overall, and consistent with Sciencewise Guiding Principles<sup>2</sup>, the evaluation evidence gathered suggests the dialogue has been credible and has created an effective engagement process with participants. This reflects a thorough dialogue design, strong facilitation at the whole group and small group levels, effective input

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/guiding-principles/>



from specialists at all stages of the dialogue, as well as an appropriate management process that has kept the Oversight Group up-to-date and engaged.

Outputs from the project include the Final Dialogue Report, executive summary report, and two dialogue films, all hosted on the Valuing Nature website<sup>3</sup>. In addition, the University of Exeter team has also engaged in 13 events that involved a wide range of stakeholders, including academics, policy stakeholders, NGOs and the private sector, with more events expected.

Immediate impacts on the public participants in the dialogue events were captured in exit questionnaires at the events. From the first phase, 70% strongly agreed, and 22% tended to agree, that taking part affected their views on the topic. There was some anecdotal evidence of participants becoming engaged in local activities as a result.

In terms of broader context, stakeholders pointed to the value of the dialogue to inform their thinking as well as providing an evidence base with more specific implications to inform policy and strategy. Key messages from the dialogue included:

- A fundamental and unambiguous connection was drawn between the natural environment and the well-being of people.
- The work of the National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA) was viewed as providing an authoritative, though quickly dating, body of evidence.
- The concept and framework of ecosystem services advanced by the National Ecosystem Assessment was viewed in a cautiously positive, or constructively critical, way by participants.
- Many of the characteristics that participants associated with good decision making about the natural environment are consistent with the principles of the Ecosystem Approach.
- State and third sector actors were considered to play a central role in governing and delivering ecosystem services.
- Valuation techniques were considered helpful within policy and decision making processes, although participants queried how valuation evidence is created, what it signifies and what it can be expected to do.
- The dialogue saw many virtues and challenges in the use of 'Payments for Ecosystem Service' schemes (PES) at the local level.
- A desirable future for UK ecosystems shared many of the characteristics of the NEA perspective.

As well as the results of engaging with the NEA being significant, the value of engaging with the public around environmental issues was also noted. Some interviewees also expressed how observing this dialogue process and reading the results has inspired them to work with a dialogue process and provide evidence to colleagues about the value of dialogue by demonstrating that the public can engage with complex issues and offer interesting and useful insights. There were also specific ideas emerging from the public discussions that specialists said they will explore further, in particular the concept of *investment* for ecosystems services (rather than payment) and an independent 'Environment Trust'.

There is also evidence of impacts in relation to implementation of different initiatives. Particularly strong was the way in which the project demonstrated the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://valuing-nature.net/naturally-speaking>



possibilities for engaging with people with the framework of ecosystems thinking and the NEA. One specialist from a government agency in Scotland reported that people were taking the results very seriously in terms of actively exploring what they could learn about how to interact more effectively with the public. Other stakeholders echoed this point saying the report offered powerful evidence that can persuade colleagues of the value of dialogue. Stakeholders also described how the dialogue would inform their approach to communicating with the public, in particular recognising that the public can engage with discussions about the complexity of the environment, and also respond well to being engaged in this way.

There were also specific impacts of the public dialogue identified by stakeholders. Notably a cohort of participants from the Birmingham dialogue acted as a sounding board for the development of a community level Natural Capital Planning tool by Birmingham City Council. Natural Resources Wales reported that the dialogue had informed practical work they are undertaking in three trial areas eliciting stakeholder views for informing area statements. They also said the report was informing their knowledge gap about socio-economic evidence in relation to natural resource management and strategic monitoring, within the context of the new Environment Bill in Wales.

The nature of the dialogue report means there are likely to be continued impacts that extend beyond the time frame of this evaluation. Specific areas of potential impact included: Clyde Forum looking at working with the Glasgow panel, the findings feeding into strategy thinking and conservation strategy at Natural England, informing future work of the Natural Capital Committee and the Conservative Party manifesto commitment to develop a 25-year plan to restore the UK's biodiversity, service co-production in relation to Public Service Reform in Scotland, work by Natural Resources Wales around the Wellbeing and Future Generations Bill looking at integrating social and public goods (including environmental protection, health and quality of life), and NERC's Valuing Nature Programme.

Overall, major achievements of this project were:

- Exemplary project management, including keeping the Oversight Group fully engaged (as well as other stakeholders).
- High quality delivery, including a strong overall dialogue process design, and design and delivery of individual events.
- Sustained dialogue over 7 months, in three regions, with an illustrative cross-section of the public consisting of 118 people (committing a total of 341 public participant days) and strong retention throughout the process. The process also benefitted from the involvement of over 40 specialists including NEA scientists, social scientists and representatives of policy delivery bodies and NGOs.
- Conclusions that were seen to be robust because of rigorous analysis based on independent transcriptions of recorded dialogue discussion, notably enabling the analysis to identify and report nuanced differences in the discussion.
- A thorough and rich report based on robust findings.
- Results that cover a wide range of issues that will appeal to a wide range of stakeholders at national and local level.
- Widespread and targeted dissemination activities reaching a wide range of stakeholders.



Key lessons for future dialogue are identified:

- *How focused on a specific decision or outcome does a public dialogue need to be?* In the case of this dialogue, there was ownership of the project within Defra, but no immediate or specific policy decision to be taken, which has also been the very strength of the project in relation to breadth of potential impact. The idea articulated by members of the Oversight Group that there was a genuine need to learn, before even starting to think about policy implications, seems to have opened the way for the findings to resonate across a broad range of stakeholders.
- *How do you know if you have the right balance of views?* There are a number of areas in relation to this project where balance needed to be addressed, and it is demonstrated that this was done effectively. Governance structure, the involvement of critical voices in delivery and the facilitation process are all important in enabling a plurality of views to be heard.
- *What is the best emphasis to have when recording small group discussions?* This question arises from observations of the dynamics of the group discussion in relation to the practices of recording comments on flip charts. Consideration needs to be given to the method of recording, including the balance between intentions to capture discussion, intentions to best engage participants and resources.
- *What is the best way to manage the relationship and responsibilities between the project lead, facilitators, design and delivery?* Specialist observers and the evaluator did note some variance in the quality of the small group facilitators and the extent to which ‘conversation’ was being enabled. It would seem that, in the future, the briefing process ought to involve direct communication between the process designer and all facilitators to avoid the risk of a cascading of the message in ways that key points and expectations are lost.
- *Who is the evaluator accountable to?* The nature of the funding arrangement on this project meant the evaluator, rather than being contracted by the commissioning body (NERC), was contracted by the delivery contractor (University of Exeter). The risk here is having different people to respond to – ‘two bosses’ in effect – and also in potentially being compromised by evaluating the practices of the body that has commissioned the evaluators.

Finally, the evaluators thank everyone that contributed time and effort to the evaluation, including the public participants, the stakeholders and the Sciencewise Evaluation Manager.



## Introduction

This report presents the evaluation of a public dialogue project on the UK National Ecosystems Assessment (NEA) concepts and findings. The project was delivered by the University of Exeter and run in partnership with Defra and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), with support from Sciencewise<sup>4</sup>.

The NEA Framework, published in 2011, drew together a wealth of scientific evidence on the character, causes and consequences of ecosystem change in the UK. The NEA process identified a number of key uncertainties in its evidence base and the mechanisms and means by which NEA science can be translated into policy and decision making. The Government therefore supported a two-year NEA follow-on (NEA-FO). The purpose of the public dialogue project was to open up the methods, analyses and findings of the NEA process to public scrutiny: inspecting and testing its assumptions; highlighting potential areas of public sensitivity and concern; and offering public insight into the ways in which NEA thinking might help inform credible policy and practice toward the environment.

The total project cost was £335,901 which was funded by an award of £318,301 from Sciencewise to NERC to fund the dialogue. Further funding to support the production of dialogue materials (animations) and to enhance impact (notably short films) was secured from the NERC Impact Accelerator Account (£10,600) plus funding by the University of Exeter (£7,000); a total of an additional £17,600. Part-funding of the equivalent of £516,000 was provided through the follow-on phase of the UK NEA, especially the work packages particularly relevant to the public dialogue exercise. Following a targeted call to undertake the dialogue, the University of Exeter, led by Dr. Rob Fish (Principal Investigator) was awarded an NERC grant of £318, 301 to lead the public dialogue (award number NE/L013894/1).

Further funding to support the production of dialogue materials (animations) and to enhance impact (notably short films) was secured from the NERC Impact Accelerator Account (£10,600) part-funded by the University of Exeter (£7,000).

The project was awarded to the University of Exeter with a start date of the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December 2013, with an end date identified as the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2015. An inception meeting was held on the 21<sup>st</sup> of January 2014. The dialogue events with the public then took place between March 2014 and October 2014 in four locations (Glasgow, Birmingham, Exeter and London). A no-cost extension was granted to the University of Exeter to allow for the completion of the final report. The dialogue Final Report was published in June 2015 and can be downloaded at [www.valuing-nature.net/naturally-speaking](http://www.valuing-nature.net/naturally-speaking)

Through a call to tender, the University of Exeter subcontracted Hopkins van Mil to recruit participants and provide support facilitation at the dialogue events. Hopkins van Mil subcontracted the recruitment of participants to a further company (Acumen Fieldwork).

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<sup>4</sup> Sciencewise is funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). Sciencewise aims to improve policy making involving science and emerging technology across Government by increasing the effectiveness with which public dialogue is used, and encouraging its wider use where appropriate. It provides a wide range of information, advice, guidance and support services aimed at policy makers and all the different stakeholders involved in science and technology policy making, including the public. Sciencewise also provides co-funding to Government departments and agencies to develop and commission public dialogue activities. [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk)



Following a call to tender, 3KQ were commissioned by the University of Exeter in January 2014 to undertake an evaluation of the dialogue project (total cost £24,998 plus VAT). The final evaluation plan was agreed with the University of Exeter and Sciencewise in March 2014 following a baseline assessment report.

In this report 'the project' refers to the NEA public dialogue project.

## Part 1 - The NEA Public Dialogue project

At times this section closely follows the text of the dialogue Final Report (*Naturally Speaking: A Public Dialogue on the UK National Ecosystem Assessment. Final Report.*).

### 1.1 Background to the NEA Public Dialogue project

The UK National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA) published in 2011, drew together a wealth of scientific evidence on the character, causes and consequences of ecosystem change in the UK. This included an assessment of change across broad habitat types, including woodland, enclosed farmland, freshwater habitats, mountains and moorland, and in the context of a range of 'ecosystem services' that underpin human well-being, including water quality, food, energy and recreation. The findings of the NEA played an influential role in policy development for the environment, with many of the conclusions of the NEA reflected in the commitments of the 2011 Natural Environment White Paper.

The NEA identified a number of key uncertainties in terms of the comprehensiveness of its evidence base and the mechanisms and means by which NEA science can be translated into policy and decision making. The Government therefore committed to supporting a two-year NEA follow-on (NEA-FO). This second phase, which reported in spring 2014, further developed and promoted the arguments put forward by the UK NEA, refined and added precision to core concepts, and developed tools that could further advance uptake of ecosystem thinking within a range of policy and decision making contexts across the UK.

The work of the NEA belongs to a growing area of scientific advocacy for the environment that utilises the concepts of natural capital and ecosystem services, and is promoted more broadly alongside an 'Ecosystem Approach' to decision making. This approach calls essentially for a 'systems' approach to ecosystem management, one built on pluralistic valuation of ecosystem services and stakeholder and public involvement in decision making<sup>5</sup>. This approach to the natural environment has become increasingly normalised across the research and the policy and practice community<sup>6</sup>. However, there are opposing views, for example about the valuation of ecosystems, and little has hitherto been known about how the NEA's work reflects wider public aspirations and concerns about the natural environment and how it is valued and managed. The purpose of the public dialogue project was therefore to open up the methods, analyses and findings of the NEA process to public scrutiny: inspecting and testing its assumptions; highlighting potential areas of public sensitivity and concern; and offering public

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cbd.int/>

<sup>6</sup> See <http://ecosystemsknowledge.net/>



insight into the ways in which NEA thinking might help inform credible policy and practice toward the environment.

### **1.1.1 Roles and Governance**

The University of Exeter was responsible for the design of the dialogue events, producing the stimulus materials, the delivery and lead facilitation of the events as well as analysis and reporting. This was led by the Principal Investigator Dr. Robert Fish (2 days a week allocated). Dr Eirini Saratsi was appointed as a full-time Research Fellow.

Dr. Robert Fish worked in liaison with a Management Group, namely Simon Kerley (NERC)<sup>7</sup>, Daniel Start (Sciencewise Dialogue and Engagement Specialist) and Simon Maxwell (Defra).

A project advisory group provided wider oversight and advice on the dialogue content, design and communications.

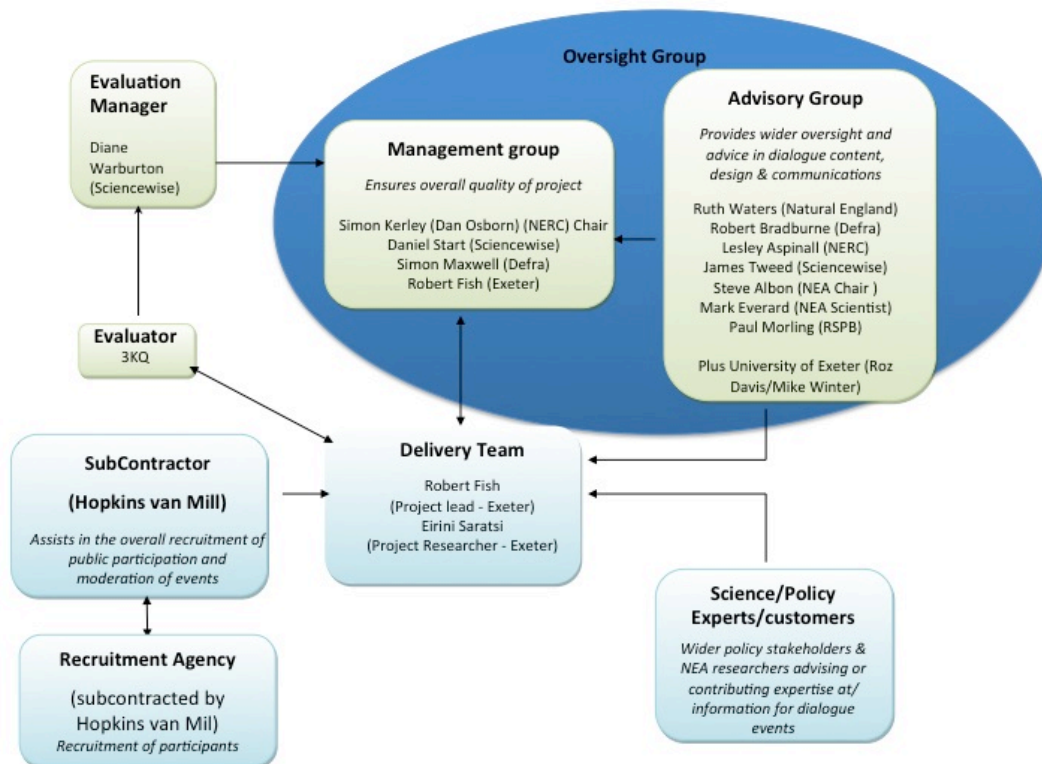
In practice, the management group and advisory group met as one group (the Oversight Group). The Oversight Group met 6 times: face-to-face at an inception meeting in Exeter (January 2014) and then in July 2014 in London, with telephone conference meetings held in April 2014, June 2014, December 2014, and April 2015.

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<sup>7</sup> Simon Kerley took on this role from March 2014, following Dan Osborn's retirement.



**Diagram 1: Governance Structure and Relationships<sup>8</sup>**



An independent agency (Hopkins van Mil) was contracted by the University of Exeter to recruit participants, and supply 4 support facilitators to assist the facilitation of small groups in the dialogue. Hopkins van Mil subcontracted the recruitment of participants to a further company.

Independent transcribers were used to transcribe the small group discussions in full.

3KQ were the independent evaluators.

### 1.1.2 Aim and scope of the dialogue

The aim of the public dialogue project was to open up the methods, analyses and findings of the NEA process and its follow-on work to public scrutiny: inspecting and testing its assumptions; highlighting potential areas of public sensitivity and concern and offering public insight into the ways in which NEA thinking might help inform credible policy and practice toward the environment.

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from a diagram presented by Dr. Rob Fish at the inception meeting.



The overall business case put forward by NERC to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)/Sciencewise proposed four thematic areas of focus for the dialogue process. These were:

1. Public views on the value of NEA concepts for explaining environmental change;
2. Influence of NEA science on public understandings of environmental change;
3. Public assessment of the adequacy of NEA recommendations for policy makers;
4. Public priorities for taking aspects of NEA science forward in policy and decision-making.

In general terms, the first two of these thematic areas were designed to provide information on how NEA concepts and science might be elaborated and communicated in the long term, with a view to this informing the NEA-FO project. The scope of the dialogue was developed with the advice of a project Oversight Group and within the context of the objectives of the overall project business case. In particular, the focus of the dialogue was refined and agreed at the inception meeting to address three key topics that formed the objectives of the dialogue:

- *The NEA's characterisation of the natural environment.* The dialogue aimed to consider whether the guiding logic of the NEA resonated with the public in terms of its characterisation of the natural environment (e.g. ecosystems representing 'natural capital' that provide a flow of 'services' influencing human well-being) and how it is understood to be changing for better or worse, (e.g. in terms of the changing provision of ecosystem services at the national and local levels). In addressing these concerns the public dialogue was designed to provide understanding of the extent to which the concept and framework of 'ecosystem services' can be expected to build public confidence in policy and practice commitments to the natural environment based on NEA thinking, and how these commitments might be best communicated and taken forward. (Part B 'Making Sense of Ecosystems' in the Final Dialogue Report, "*Naturally Speaking: A Public Dialogue on the UK National Ecosystem Assessment. Final Report*")
- *Applications of NEA concepts and approaches to decision making.* Set within the NEA's broad advocacy of the Ecosystem Approach to decision making, the dialogue considered practical applications of NEA thinking to reflect on what constitutes acceptable, necessary, practical and accountable approaches to ecosystem management. Within this, the dialogue gave specific consideration to a range of salient NEA concerns including: the legitimacy of valuation agendas and approaches; the presumption of broad and deep stakeholder and public involvement in environmental decision making; and the emergence of market-based mechanisms for securing sustainable management of ecosystems at the local level (specifically 'payment for ecosystem services' [PES] schemes). The dialogue considered how challenges and sensitivities arising out of the development and practical application of an ecosystems approach might be minimised and overcome. (Part C 'Making Decisions and Managing Ecosystems Services' in the final Dialogue Report)
- *Evaluating NEA futures and response options.* The dialogue explored how the public think about the future of UK ecosystems. By exploring the plausibility and desirability of NEA scenarios the dialogue explored the long term trends, issues, risks and uncertainties anticipated by the public and what types of arrangements and interventions will be necessary to act upon and secure ecosystem futures in a desirable way. This included specific consideration and evaluation of the NEA's framework of: foundational responses (generating and



distributing new knowledge), enabling responses (developing legislation, policies and governance arrangements) and instrumental responses (incentivising behaviour of individuals and organisations). (Part D 'What the Future Holds' in the Final Dialogue Report)

(Note it was agreed following a baseline review that the evaluation would be based on these refined objectives – see below)

### 1.1.3 Delivery of the dialogue events

The dialogue events with the public participants took place between March and September 2014 and were divided into two key stages.

#### Stage 1 - Regional dialogue events

Stage 1 involved one-day regional dialogue events held in Birmingham, Exeter and Glasgow on three separate occasions in each location between March and June 2014 (i.e. 9 dialogue events in total) at which participants and specialists explored and discussed the three key areas of dialogue. The locations were chosen to capture different regional contexts.

In Stage 1 each of the three 'rounds' of dialogue followed a consistent process design between groups and locations, although the dialogue stimuli and participating specialists varied to reflect the regional specificity of each event. A design feature of the first stage of dialogue was keeping participants in the same discussion group over the course of the three events and building group specialism around habitats. In each of the locations participants were divided into four socio-demographically mixed groups of up to 10 people to consider issues relating to:

- Upland landscapes – moorlands, heaths and semi-natural grasslands;
- Enclosed farmlands and managed woodlands;
- Urban/urban fringe – including freshwater habitats;
- Coastal margins and marine environments.

Most groups had the same facilitator throughout the process in order to establish a sense of accumulating knowledge about areas of ecosystem management.

In general, the events closely mirrored the three thematic areas of the dialogue, as follows:

#### *Dialogue Round 1. Exploring our changing ecosystems.*

The first round of dialogue events introduced participants to the concepts and framework of ecosystem services, and more generally familiarised participants with

### Diagram 2: Stages of the dialogue

#### Stage 1- Regional Events

##### *Our changing ecosystems*

- Exeter - 29<sup>th</sup> March
- Birmingham - 5<sup>th</sup> April
- Glasgow - 26<sup>th</sup> April

##### *Managing our ecosystems*

- Exeter - 10<sup>th</sup> May
- Birmingham - 17<sup>th</sup> May
- Glasgow - 31<sup>st</sup> May

##### *The challenge for decision makers*

- Exeter - 7<sup>th</sup> June
- Birmingham - 14<sup>th</sup> June
- Glasgow - 21<sup>st</sup> June

#### Stage 2 - National Event

##### *Valuing Nature*

- London 30<sup>th</sup> September

##### *Assigning roles and responsibilities*

- London 1<sup>st</sup> October



the work and findings of the NEA. The process involved eliciting participant reactions to images depicting local examples of NEA broad habitats and asking them to speculate on what these environments might do for individuals and communities. The process was designed to allow participants to discover the concept of ecosystem services on their own terms. Over the course of the event participants were then introduced to the NEA and probed on how the concept of ecosystem services resonated with their own views of the natural world. Participants then applied the framework to a hypothetical catchment system where a number of decision issues and management options had to be addressed: producing more food from land and sea; cleaning up water; and building more homes.

*Dialogue Round 2. Managing our ecosystems.*

The second round of events moved from the conceptual and general to the practical and specific. It used real world case studies to evaluate how the ecosystem services framework has been applied, or is planned to be applied, in particular arenas of ecosystem management. Examples were chosen that were relevant to locality but also flagged up as exemplars in the policy literature and NEA<sup>9</sup>. These are illustrated in Table 1 below in which the different examples in each location are described. Discussion was structured around exploring and discussing project aims, assumptions and models of working, and the examples were used to stimulate debate about the wider issues and challenges arising from applying ecosystem services thinking in practice, specifically with reference to the principles of the Ecosystem Approach. The case studies tackled a number of habitat contexts (upland, lowland, urban/urban fringe and the coastal/marine environment).

A summary of the dialogue case studies as presented in the project Final Dialogue Report is below.

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<sup>9</sup> Although the dialogue team also consciously chose counter-intuitive examples, such as the Birmingham public considering marine spatial planning.



**Table 1 : Dialogue case studies**

<b>Project</b>	<b>Leaders/Key Partners</b>
<b>Exeter Dialogue</b>	
<b>Upstream Thinking/(PES)</b>	<i>South West Water</i>
Upstream Thinking is a new approach to improving raw water resources. The aim of the project is to improve raw water quality and manage the quantity of water, at source, long before it reaches water treatment works, by improved land management.	
<b>Marine spatial planning</b>	<i>Marine Management Organisation</i>
Marine spatial planning is a process that brings together multiple users of the ocean – including energy, industry, government, conservation and recreation – to make informed and coordinated decisions about how to use marine resources sustainably.	
<b>Northern Devon NIA</b>	<i>Natural England/Devon Wildlife Trust</i>
The Northern Devon Nature Improvement Area is one of 12 nationally important landscape-scale wildlife schemes across England. It specifically aims to restore Culm grassland and woodlands, create new wildlife habitat and improve water quality.	
<b>Spatial/local planning</b>	<i>North Devon District Council</i>
The North Devon and Torridge Joint Local Plan is adopting an Ecosystem Approach to help shape the statutory framework for the future development of the area.	
<b>Birmingham Dialogue</b>	
<b>Green/blue infrastructure</b>	<i>Birmingham City Council</i>
As part of the development of the City's Local Development Framework a Green Infrastructure Strategy has been developed which applies the Ecosystem Approach to the city's network of green and blue infrastructure.	
<b>Catchment-based approach (Fowley Brook)</b>	<i>Environment Agency/Stoke city council</i>
The Fowley Brook project is building capacity for a catchment-based approach to reducing flood risk, while promoting the water quality, biodiversity & recreational potential of Stoke, as well as promoting economic regeneration.	
<b>Marine spatial planning</b>	<i>Marine Management Organisation</i>
<i>(As Exeter)</i>	
<b>Glasgow Dialogue</b>	
<b>Seven Lochs Wetland Park</b>	<i>GCV Green Network Partnership</i>
Glasgow and Clyde Valley Green Network Partnership, Glasgow City Council, North Lanarkshire Council, and the Forestry Commission Scotland are working together to develop the Seven Lochs Wetland Park as a place for people, nature and heritage.	
<b>Glazert Pilot Catchment Project</b>	<i>Scottish Environmental Protection Agency</i>
The Scottish Environment Protection Agency is developing the River Glazert project which is using an Ecosystem Approach to restore the river to a more natural state, but at the same time helping to alleviate flooding.	
<b>Carse of Stirling Pilot (Land use strategy)</b>	<i>Scottish Natural Heritage</i>
The Carse of Stirling Project has piloted a method for using the Ecosystem Approach within south west Stirlingshire to involve a range of people in exploring land-use options and to prioritise and deliver benefits from nature.	
<b>Firth of Clyde Ecosystems Project</b>	<i>Firth of Clyde Forum</i>
The Glasgow and the Clyde Valley Strategic Development Planning Authority are using the Ecosystem Approach to promote natural solutions to environmental change, including flood risk management, water quality, biodiversity and recreation.	



### *Dialogue Round 3. Shaping the future: the challenge for decision makers*

The third dialogue event focused on strategic and long term concerns. It introduced participants to future scenarios developed by the NEA with discussion specifically exploring public impressions of four of the NEA futures: Green and Pleasant Land; World Markets; 'Nature@work'; and National Security. Participants were asked to consider these scenarios on the grounds of probability and preferability. Within this participants were asked to think about their preferred vision for the future (2060) and to consider how this vision could be achieved using the NEA's framework of foundational, instrumental and enabling responses. Again, participants explored and contextualised the NEA's framework based on the four broad environments: upland landscapes, agricultural and managed woodland landscapes, urban/urban fringe, and marine and coastal environments. Discussion elicited public assessments of the types of interventions and actions society should take to shape more sustainable futures and what factors foster or impede these.

**Table 2 : Dialogue scenarios**

- *Nature@work*: a scenario in which the promotion of ecosystem services through the creation of multifunctional landscapes for maintaining the quality of life in the UK is widely accepted;
- *Green and Pleasant Land*: a scenario in which a preservationist attitude arises because the UK can afford to look after its own backyard without diminishing ever-increasing standards of living;
- *National Security*: a scenario in which climate change results in increases in global energy prices forcing many countries to attempt greater self-sufficiency (and efficiency) in many of their core industries;
- *World Markets*: a scenario in which high economic growth with a greater focus on removing barriers to trade is the fundamental characteristic.

### **Stage 2 - National Dialogue Event - London**

The second stage involved a national dialogue event held in London in September 2014 over one-and-a-half days. This involved reconvening a subsample of 33 participants (13 from Birmingham, 10 from Exeter and 10 from Glasgow) at a one-and-a-half day event to discuss and evaluate further some of the implications of the NEA for policy development and decision making. This event aimed to consolidate and extend the findings of the dialogue by specifically addressing two key issues: first, whether and in what contexts valuation provides an acceptable basis for making decisions about the natural environment, and second, assigning roles and responsibilities in managing the natural environment.

### *Dialogue Round 4 - Valuing our natural environment*

The dialogue used practical valuation examples to explore whether and how public assessments and perceptions of 'good' decision making about the natural environment are: reinforced, challenged or transformed by different approaches to the valuation of natural environment and ecosystem services; require the use of particular types and mixes of valuation analyses; or rely on approaches to decision making that are contrary or counterpointed to the valuation approaches. In pursuing these concerns the dialogue considered: how views on valuation vary according to the scales of decision making (e.g. national and local decisions); who creates and owns valuation evidence (e.g. government, business or researchers);



the focus of valuation (e.g. how views may vary according to different ecosystem services or habitat types); and ethical considerations (e.g. rights of nature).

#### *Dialogue Round 5 – Assigning roles and responsibilities*

Again, drawing on practical examples the dialogue explored in what ways, and to what extent, implementing the Ecosystem Approach in local contexts should promote and enable the development of market-based mechanisms to reward and finance sustainable behaviours and practices. It also explored how government and wider civil society actors might assume particular roles and responsibilities in relation to these potential developments. Understanding how reasoning varies according to context was important in this dialogue, such as variation according to the type of market-based mechanism, the scale of management, and problem focus.

Throughout the events a range of stimulus materials – presentations, electronic polling, visual and written texts, including data and maps as well as cartoons and animations – were used in the process, examples of which are included in several places in the Final Dialogue Report. Key specialists contributed to the discussion (see below).

#### **1.1.4 Participants in the dialogue**

The focus of the dialogue was primarily on the contribution of ‘public’ participants. The dialogue also encouraged the participation of specialists i.e. those with interests in the policy development, scientific basis or implementation aspects of the dialogue topic.

##### *Public participants*

A market research company was commissioned to recruit and incentivise public participants. The target was 40 public participants in each location attending each of the three events (i.e. a target of 120 public participants in total; with 360 public days committed overall). The final numbers attending the first phase of dialogue are provided in the table below. In total 118 people attended all or part of the dialogue and 341 public participant days were committed overall. Public participants were recruited to events with the aim of ensuring an illustrative cross-section in terms of age, gender, occupation, ethnicity, and rural and urban backgrounds, as well as levels of self-reported awareness and interest in environmental issues. In this last respect it is important to view the findings in the context of a good cross-section of stated environmental knowledge and investments. Over 40 per cent of participants suggested they had little or no understanding of environmental issues and over 50 per cent suggested they did not follow environmental debates in the media or only did so in a limited way. Participants were therefore screened purposively to ensure there were no known active affiliations to environmental organisations and no participant had been involved in the area of ecosystem service research and policy delivery (see table below). The demographic profile is reflective of the 2011 census following guidance from Sciencewise for gender and age, though there is a marginally higher representation of educated groups.



**Table 3: Stage 1 Public Participation – Demographic Profile<sup>10</sup>**

Age distribution		Gender		Social grade		Place of residence	
18-25 years	23 %	Male	50.5%	B	20 %	Urban area	28 %
26-45 years	28 %	Female	49.5%	C1	37%	Urban by the coast	4 %
46-65 years	22 %			C2	15 %	Semi-urban area	51 %
>65 years	27 %			D	11 %	Rural	15 %
				E	15 %	Rural by the coast	2 %
				AB	2 %		
Ethnicity*		Qualifications		Hard to reach social group**		Life stage***	
White British	81%	None	20 %	Elderly	11 %	Empty nester	33 %
African	3 %	Compulsory	16 %	Deprived	8 %	No dependents	19 %
Asian (Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani)	9 %	Post-compulsory /further education	40 %	Geographically isolated	4 %	Older family	11 %
Caribbean	2 %	Higher	21 %	Socially isolated	5 %	Pre-family	22 %
Other Ethnic background (Irish, Greek, Polish)	5 %	Post grads	3 %	None of these	72 %	Young family	15 %
Do you work for any organisations or institutions undertaking research or policy implementations based on the ecosystem service framework?				Are you an activist member of any of the following?			
Yes				Environmental Groups			
No		100 %		NGOs (non-governmental organisations)			
				None of these		100 %	
On a scale of 1-5, to what extent do you have knowledge of environmental issues? 1 = no knowledge & 5 = extensive knowledge				On a scale of 1-5, to what extent do you follow environmental debates in the media? 1 = not followed at all & 5 = closely followed			
1		5 %		1		22 %	
2		37 %		2		33 %	
3		38 %		3		29 %	
4		16 %		4		13 %	
5		4 %		5		3 %	
*Participants self-described themselves by answering the question: ‘How would you describe your ethnicity?’							
**Where: <i>Elderly</i> = people over 65 that were more frail than other people their age (e.g. had home help or a carer); <i>Deprived</i> = people on benefits or a particularly low income or with health issues that limit capacity to work; <i>Geographically isolated</i> = people who live out of a city, town, village or hamlet in remote rural areas; <i>Socially isolated</i> = people who stated that they have no family and felt isolated within their local community.							
***Where: <i>Empty Nester</i> = children left home; <i>No Dependents</i> = never had children; <i>Older Family</i> = children aged 11-18; <i>Pre-Family</i> = No children yet; <i>Young Family</i> = children aged 0-11.							

<sup>10</sup> The tables in this section are as presented in the Final Dialogue Report



**Table 4: Stage 1 Public Participation – Numbers and Retention**

Loc.	Event 1			Event 2				Event 3		
	Att.	No show	Left early	Att.	No show	Retained	New Recruits	Att.	No show	Retained
Ext	36	4	-	36	4	33	3	35	5	34
Bm	40	-	-	40	-	40	-	40	-	40
Gw	36	2	2	39	1	36	3	39	1	39
	<b>112</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>113</b>
Att.= numbers in attendance; no show= invitees who did not show up; retained = participants who re-attended dialogue; new recruits = substitutes for no shows.										

**Table 5: Stage 2 Public Participation – Numbers**

	Invited	Attended	Attended
<b>Birmingham</b>	12	13*	
<b>Exeter</b>	12	10	1 due to illness 1 unknown reasons/never responded subsequent letters 'return to sender'
<b>Glasgow</b>	12	10	1 car accident the day before the event 1 Unknown reasons/never responded to subsequent letters
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>4</b>

\*1 volunteered to participate to the London event, willing to cover his own expenses. This participant was officially integrated into the group the day of the event when participants from Exeter and Glasgow did not attend (see reasons above).

### Specialists

The process also included the participation of a range of specialists, including NEA scientists, social scientists and representatives of policy delivery bodies and NGOs (see table below). In total 30 specialists were involved in Stage 1, providing a total of 42 specialist days being committed to the process; 15 specialists were involved in stage 2, providing a total of 21 specialist days in Stage 2.



**Table 6: Stage 1 Specialist Participation**

Event	Contributors	Exeter		Birmingham		Glasgow	
1	NEA Scientists	M. Everard	UWE	M. Everard	UWE	Mark Everard	UWE
		M. Winter	EX	A. Scott	BCU		
	Other Specialists/ Observers	P. Sadler	EA	H. Featherstone	EX	S. Shirley N. Melville	SEPA
				T. Pickering	EA	Fiona Mills	FCF
2	NEA Scientists	M. Everard	UWE	M. Everard	UWE	Mark Everard	UWE
	Specialists/ Observers	P. Cosgrove	MMO	C. Kavanagh	MMO	J. MacPherson S. Shirley	SEPA
		M. Ross	SWW	T. Pickering	EA	F. Mills	FCF
		A. Austen M. Kelly	NDDC	S. Wykes	SCC	S. Fergusson	GCVGN
		L. Schneida u	DWT	N. Grayson	BCC	N. Makan	SNH
		A. Bell	NDB				
3	NEA Scientists	G. Kass	NE	M. Everard	UWE	M. Everard	UWE
		D. Russel	EX	A. Church	UB	J. Kenter	UA
	Other Specialists/ Observers	M. Stithou P. Cosgrove	MMO	A. Lanning	MMO	S. Shirley R. Badger	SEPA
				T. Pickering	EA	I. Glasgow	FCF
Abbreviations. BCC: Birmingham City Council, BCU: Birmingham City University, DWT: Devon Wildlife Trust, EA: Environment Agency, EX: University of Exeter, FCF; Firth of Clyde Forum, MMO: Marine Management Organisation, NDB: North Devon Biosphere, NDDC: North Devon District Council, NE: Natural England, SCC: Stoke City Council, SEPA: Scottish Environment Protection Agency , SWW: South West Water, UB: University of Brighton, SNH: Scottish Natural Heritage, UA: University of Aberdeen. UWE: University of the West of England							



**Table 7: Stage 2 Specialist Participation**

Contributors	Day 1		Day 2	
NEA Scientists	Ian Bateman	UEA	Mark Everard	UWE
	Nigel Cooper	ARU		
	Mark Everard	UWE		
Specialists/ Observers	Tom Hooper	RSPB	Isabel Glasgow	FCF
	Gary Kass	NE	Tom Hooper	RSPB
	Helen Dunn	Defra	Simon Kerley	NERC
	Simon Maxwell	Defra	Simon Maxwell	Defra
	Colin Smith	Defra	Steve Spode	WG
	Marva Stithou	MMO	Marva Stithou	MMO
	Isabel Glasgow	FCF	Sian Sullivan	BSU
	Ruth Waters	NE	Ruth Waters	NE
			Duncan Williams	Defra
<b>Abbreviations.</b> ARU: Anglia Ruskin University; BSU: Bath Spa University; Defra; Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; FCF: Firth of Clyde Forum, MMO: Marine Management Organisation, NE: Natural England, NERC: Natural Environment Research Council; RSPB: Royal Society for the Protection of Birds; UWE: University of the West of England, WG: Welsh Government.				

### 1.1.5 Capturing and analysing data

The project team kept a record of proceedings in the form of audio recordings, flip charts, posters, postcards, and questionnaires. There was also a project blog where participants could share thoughts. A video recording of the process formed the basis for a dialogue video<sup>11</sup>.

Group discussions were recorded and transcribed in full by an independent transcription company. Written records from discussion groups were summarised and converted to Word files. Electronic and written questionnaires were converted into spreadsheet documents. The transcripts were reviewed and coded, and grouped against dialogue themes using qualitative data analysis software (Nvivo) and sometimes manually. Significantly, throughout the report the authors indicate when views are commonly held and sustained across the dialogue while using multiple quotes to draw out and differentiate views around salient points.

### 1.1.6 Key messages from the Dialogue

Key messages from the dialogue, as presented in the Final Dialogue Report Executive Summary are:

- **A fundamental and unambiguous connection was drawn between the natural environment and the well-being of people.** The natural environment was valued by participants for a range of cultural and health benefits and considered central to human livelihoods and prosperity. Yet participants were generally pessimistic about the future of their local natural environments at the outset of the dialogue and ambivalent about whether progress was being made on current and emerging environmental risks and challenges.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/dialogue-project-videos/>



- **The work of the National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA) was viewed as providing an authoritative, though quickly dating, body of evidence.** Participants were generally encouraged to learn that an assessment of the scope and ambition of the NEA had been commissioned by government and its findings should be welcomed and acted upon by policy and decision makers. At its most positive, some participants suggested the Assessment might serve as a modern day and environmental equivalent of the 'Beveridge Report', around which the public should be encouraged to rally.
- **The concept and framework of ecosystem services advanced by the National Ecosystem Assessment was viewed in a cautiously positive, or constructively critical, way by participants.** They were particularly supportive of its holistic ambitions and its interconnected perspective and felt that it would challenge preconceived wisdoms about the remit of the environmental agenda. However, a significant minority were sceptical about advancing use of the term 'services' to describe and manage human uses and understandings of nature. They felt it was consumerist in outlook and expressed concern that people would end up paying for things they currently have the right to access and use freely. In general, participants tended to be more positive about the concept and framework of ecosystem services the more they considered it in the context of decision making and real world applications of the Ecosystem Approach.
- **Many of the characteristics that participants associated with good decision making about the natural environment are consistent with the principles of the Ecosystem Approach.** The positive and inclusive outlook of the Approach appealed to people, and they saw procedural and economic advantages in applying these principles. They felt it helpfully emphasised natural solutions to environmental challenges. However, a number of risks and challenges were identified in taking the Approach forward including how to: foster awareness and engagement of relevant stakeholders; create a credible evidence base; implement goals and; ensure that objectives are met over the long term.
- **State and third sector actors were considered to play a central role in governing and delivering ecosystem services.** Participants were generally suspicious about the interests and involvement of business in dictating and delivering priorities for the natural environment. Participants viewed national government as playing a strong enabling and leadership role, and valued highly the role of publicly funded institutions and programmes of research to deliver long term public benefit from the environment, and to protect against risks. They viewed third sector actors, particularly those with localised and specialised environmental remits, as playing an important role in managing and informing new arrangements for ecosystem services delivery, such as 'payments for ecosystem service' schemes.
- **Valuation techniques were considered helpful within policy and decision making processes, although participants queried how valuation evidence is created, what it signifies and what it can be expected to do.** Participant views on the use of valuation methods had



political, ethical and tactical dimensions and were often sensitive to the scale and object of decision making. Monetary valuation techniques were considered important tools for helping to communicate and influence the general case for the natural environment and were often associated with the virtues of transparency, objectivity and clarity in decision making. They were interpreted as a necessary, but insufficient basis for decision making. In general, the rationale and need for different types of valuation was sensitive to the perceived uncertainty and complexity of a decision issue and whether the issue was of national and local concern. Overall, there was a very strong message about the need for pluralistic approaches to valuation, especially for issues of high complexity at all levels of decision making.

- **The dialogue saw many virtues and challenges in the use of 'Payments for Ecosystem Service' schemes (PES) at the local level.** They liked the PES focus on rewarding and encouraging positive behaviour, although they frequently returned to the idea of 'polluter pays' in order to emphasise that poor environmental practices should be penalised. There was concern that PES schemes appear rather voluntaristic and market orientated in outlook, but participants recognised that there are many opportunities and rationales for a variety of local beneficiaries to pay in to schemes. In terms of the coordination and implementation of local PES schemes, participants overwhelmingly associated desirable scheme design and implementation with the involvement of third sector organisations.
- **A desirable future for UK ecosystems shared many of the characteristics of the NEA perspective.** Participants emphasised desirable futures in terms of: multifunctional uses of the environment; social values cohering around care for the environment; active participation of communities in decision making; pluralistic forms of evidence to inform management; a strong leadership/enabling role played by government; and technology playing a central role in innovation towards sustainable landscape and ecosystem management.

## 1.2 Evaluation Aims, Objectives and Methodology

The aim of this evaluation of the UK NEA Public Dialogue was to a) provide an independent assessment of the impacts and quality of the dialogue project to demonstrate the extent of the project's success, credibility and effectiveness against its objectives, covering both the outcomes and the dialogue processes (including an assessment of impacts on policy and those involved) and b) to contribute to increasing the wider effectiveness and use of public dialogue.

In order to meet these aims the objectives for the evaluation were agreed to be:

- to gather and present objective and robust evidence of the impacts, achievements and activities of the project in order to come to conclusions.
- to identify lessons from the project to support capacity building across government, and the wider development of good practice in public dialogue.



The key questions informing these objectives as set out in the Invitation to Tender for the evaluation are:

- Has the dialogue met its objectives? Were the objectives set the right ones?
- Has the dialogue met standards of good practice (according to Sciencewise Guiding Principles)?
- The value and benefits of the project, including the extent to which all those involved have been satisfied with the dialogue outcomes and process.
- How successful has the governance of the project been, including the role of stakeholders, the Oversight Group, the commissioning body and Sciencewise?
- What difference/impact has the dialogue made on policy and decisions, on decision making, and on policy makers and others involved including public participants, expert speakers and other stakeholders (e.g. learning, interest in future dialogue)?
- What was the balance overall of the costs and benefits of the dialogue?
- What are the lessons for the future (what worked well and less well, and more widely)?

The evaluation took place in three phases.

**Baseline assessment phase** – involved 9 pre-dialogue interviews with the commissioning body and Oversight Group about their aspirations for the UK NEA public dialogue, including the policy context within which they anticipate impact. These interviews informed a baseline assessment report distributed to the Oversight Group in March 2014 from which a final evaluation plan was agreed.

**Interim assessment phase** – was conducted as a formative evaluation process that involved giving feedback to the University of Exeter at all stages of the process, from design to delivery. This phase included observing 3 events from the first stage of the dialogue (Workshop 1 in Birmingham, Workshop 2 in Glasgow, and Workshop 3 in Birmingham) and the final dialogue event in London. This allowed us to view a sample of the dialogue events to see first hand how the workshops were framed, introduced, run, and reacted to. Attendance at the events also allowed us to conduct brief informal interviews with participants to complement the formal exit questionnaires (see below). To gain a mix of quantitative and qualitative data from participants, written exit questionnaires were completed in the room by public participants and specialists before the end of all workshops. The questionnaires focused on perceptions of the quality of delivery and perceptions of impact (on both the participants themselves as well as policy). A short observational report was sent to the University of Exeter after each of these events along with the results of the surveys.

Follow-up interviews were also conducted with specialists who attended the workshops – 9 interviews were undertaken after the first phase of dialogue events and 7 following the final event in phase 2. These interviews were to allow more exploration of the experience of the dialogue events and the potential impact on their thinking, decision making etc., as well as reflections on the wider process of the dialogue and its likely impact.

Two interim reports were written and distributed to the Oversight Group following stage one (July 2014) and stage two of the dialogue (October 2014). Debrief meetings were held with Dr. Robert Fish (University of Exeter) and Diane Warburton (Sciencewise) as part of a formative evaluation process. Further still, throughout the evaluation process we have maintained continued liaison with the University of Exeter and Sciencewise and feedback to the Oversight Group.



**Final assessment** – involved document review of the University of Exeter Public Dialogue Report, interviews with the Oversight Group (8 interviews), stakeholder interviews (10 in total), interviews with the University of Exeter (2 interviews) and the independent facilitators (1 interview).

Two aspects of the originally planned evaluation that were not delivered as anticipated were: a Cost Monitoring Framework and an Impact Monitoring Framework. Following a lack of response from the Oversight Group to an initial request for information on both these issues (costs, and impacts), the decision was taken not to pursue regular requests from the Oversight Group for information. This reflected that, in practice, as well as members finding it difficult to prioritise such requests, regular feedback about potential impacts was received at dialogue events and oversight meetings. Impact is reviewed in sections 3.1 and 3.2. Regarding costs, the evaluators have – later in this report – estimated the time commitment from Oversight Group members based on their knowledge of attendance and dates of meetings (see assessment in section 3.3).



## Part 2 – Evaluation of the NEA Public Dialogue

This part of the report details the evaluation of the project. Overall, the evidence suggests a high quality dialogue was delivered which met the Sciencewise Guiding Principles for public dialogue. These are summarised in the table below. Part 2 of the evaluation report then details how the project met the objectives, the overall experience and satisfaction of participants, credibility, and governance. Part 3 then looks at the costs and benefits, dissemination and impact, lessons and conclusions.

<b>Guiding Principle</b>	<b>Indicator (as agreed in evaluation plan)</b>	<b>General Statement of Evidence</b>
GP1 - Context	Clear objectives from the outset; clear context for impact in policy/decision making process.	As detailed in section 1.1.2 the aims and scope of the project were refined and agreed with the Oversight Group. The baseline review highlighted the different potential levels of policy/decision making impact. Evidence of impact is demonstrated in section 3.2 and suggests that the dialogue offers insights that are relevant and being drawn up from a wide range of audiences (see section 3.4 on lessons).
GP2 - Scope	Addressed concerns and aspirations of the AG; clarity about scope of the dialogue in relation to NEA framework; be clear to participants about the influence of the project; incorporate diversity of perspectives.	There was a consistent, detailed and thorough engagement with the Oversight Group throughout the process (see section 2.4.4); clarity over the scope was established in inception meeting (see 1.1.2); Participants understood the scope of the project (see 2.2.4); a diversity of perspectives were incorporated into the dialogue process (see section 2.2.6)
GP3 - Delivery	Dialogue process appropriate to enable engagement with the framework (including fair, non-confrontational etc.); Ensures credibility of the process using a variety of techniques, appropriate representativeness and transparent analysis; Appropriate specialists and stakeholders involved; Openness about plurality and lack of consensus.	As evidenced by evaluator observations of events, public and specialist questionnaires, and follow-up interviews with specialists, overall an appropriate design and delivery process was delivered (section 2.2); the project was seen by specialists as credible, both in delivery and the presentation of analysis (see section 2.3 specifically on credibility); specialist representation was appropriate (see section on 1.1.4 on specialists involved, and 2.2.3 on their role in the events); openness



		about plurality and lack of consensus was demonstrated by explicit debate throughout the dialogue and notably in the final workshop; the analysis presents nuanced views in the final report.
GP4 - Impact	See Baseline Review table of pathways in appendix.	Impacts were demonstrated at various levels including participants, broader context of policy/decision making thinking, areas of implementation as well as more specific impacts (section 3.2).
GP5 - Evaluation	n/a	An independent evaluation has been conducted.

Overall the evidence of the evaluation, which we detail in the remainder of this section, suggests the dialogue has been credible and has created an effective engagement process with participants. This reflects a thorough dialogue design, strong facilitation at the whole group and small group levels, effective input from specialists at all stages of the dialogue, as well as an appropriate management process that has kept the Oversight Group up to date. It is also important to note that the final workshop involved a process design that was adapted to incorporate some more critical perspectives about the role of valuation. Feedback from participants, specialists and the Oversight Group confirm that the project management and dialogue events were run with professionalism. The Final Dialogue Report presents a detailed analysis – described by one member of the Oversight Group in the end of project evaluation interviews as ‘the best we’ve ever seen’ – that is organised thematically around the project objectives (Making sense of ecosystems, Making Decisions and Managing Ecosystem services, What the future holds).

*“There were well designed exercises and it was professionally run, a successful experiment in engaging people.”* (Ashley Hold, DEFRA)

## 2.1 Meeting the project objectives

NERC reported that the proposal from the University of Exeter had suggested a refinement to the original business case for Sciencewise/BIS funding. This reflected the time taken to agree the procurement process, which meant the dialogue project could not be embedded within the delivery time of the NEA-FO project. Delays to project initiation were largely the result of the complex procurement rules for large scale research projects. NEA/NEA-FO researchers developed a proposal but Defra were unable to treat a project of this scale as a single tender action or extension to the NEA-FO contract, and it took some time to identify an alternative mechanism. NERC eventually issued a grant for the project, which was run in partnership with Defra, NERC and Sciencewise. Hence, the refinement was suggested by the University of Exeter to ensure good value for money within the committed resource, including a focus on policy development and encompassing local as well as national elements of this. The refined objectives were agreed by the Oversight Group at the inception meeting as follows (further detailed in section 1.1.2):

- *The NEA’s characterisation of the natural environment.* The dialogue aimed to consider whether the guiding logic of the NEA resonated with the public’s in terms of its characterisation of the natural environment (e.g. ecosystems



representing ‘natural capital’ that provide a flow of ‘services’ influencing human well-being) and how it is understood to be changing for better or worse, (e.g. in terms of the changing provision of ecosystem services at the national and local levels).

- *Applications of NEA concepts and approaches to decision making.* Set within the NEA’s broad advocacy of the Ecosystem Approach to decision making, the dialogue considered practical applications of NEA thinking to reflect on what constitutes acceptable, necessary, practical and accountable approaches to ecosystem management.
- *Evaluating NEA futures and response options.* The dialogue explored how the public think about the future of UK ecosystems.

The dialogue Final Report evidences the way in which the dialogue design directly addressed the three core objectives:

- Firstly, in relation to ***The NEA’s characterisation of the natural environment***, the report presents the ways in which the logic of the NEA resonates with the participants’ characterisation of the natural environment, and how it is understood to be changing for better or worse (Part B). The report evidences how the public dialogue provided understanding of the extent to which the concept and framework of ‘ecosystem services’ can be expected to build public confidence in policy and practice commitments to the natural environment based on NEA thinking, and how these commitments might be best communicated and taken forward.
- Secondly, the dialogue considered ***Applications of NEA concepts and approaches to decision making*** to reflect on what constitutes acceptable, necessary, practical and accountable approaches to ecosystem management (Part C). Within this, the dialogue gave specific consideration to a range of NEA concerns including: the legitimacy of valuation agendas and approaches; the presumption of broad and deep stakeholder and public involvement in environmental decision making; and the emergence of market-based mechanisms for securing sustainable management of ecosystems at the local level (specifically ‘payment for ecosystem services’ [PES] schemes). The dialogue considered how challenges and sensitivities arising out of the development and practical application of an ecosystems approach might be minimised and overcome.
- Thirdly, the objective on ***Evaluating NEA futures and response options*** was met by exploring how the public thought about the future of UK ecosystems. By exploring the plausibility and desirability of NEA scenarios the dialogue explored the long term trends, issues, risks and uncertainties anticipated by the public and what types of arrangements and interventions will be necessary to act upon and secure ecosystem futures in a desirable way. This included specific consideration and evaluation of the NEA’s framework of: foundational responses (generating and distributing new knowledge), enabling responses (developing legislation, policies and governance arrangements) and instrumental responses (incentivising behaviour of individuals and organisations).

The high quality of the report is captured by one member of the Oversight Group in the end of project evaluation interviews as ‘the best we’ve ever seen’.

## 2.2 Overall experience and satisfaction

Public participants clearly enjoyed the events, were engaged in the topic, had sustained involvement with excellent turn out, and demonstrated very positive feedback in the questionnaires. For example, key words written by public participants in the ‘any other comments’ section of the exit questionnaires at the



first dialogue events included: 'excellent', 'interesting', 'brilliant', 'enlightening', 'insightful', 'informative', 'knowledgeable', 'eye opener', 'exciting'. One comment stands out: *"It has been absolutely amazing and eye-opening. I wish more social or environmental research was done this way. Thank you!"*. This sentiment was echoed in the final event where exit-questionnaires also demonstrate very positive

*"It was a very positive day, I enjoyed myself as a delegate. It flowed nicely, and maintained energy right to the end. It was structured well."* (Duncan Williams, Defra)

feedback. Words used to describe their experience included: 'informative', 'thought-provoking', 'inspirational' and 'educational'. One public participant wrote in 'any other comments' at the final event: *"From*

*being unsure that I wanted to come I have gone to not wanting it to end"*. This positive experience and sense of satisfaction was reinforced by the specialists attending the events who used words such as 'refreshing', 'interesting', 'stimulating' and even 'fun' to capture their experience. There were few comments that implied participants overall had anything but a positive experience.

Given the positive experiences expressed, it is not surprising to find such strong retention of participants across the events, notably Birmingham where 40 participants were recruited and attended all three of the first stage events.

### 2.2.1 Provision of Information

The University of Exeter had sent participants a brief leaflet before the first dialogue event stating that they would be discussing important issues about the environment. Participants were then given an information pack when they first arrived and allowed time to read the information before the event started. The information pack contained: general dialogue background and ground rules as well as a detailed glossary. This information was provided again at the next events, along with new information as appropriate. Participants were reminded of the purposes of the project and of the particular events, at each event. This included using warm-up questions that reinforced the purpose of events and connections to past events. Any participant who joined the project for the first time at the second event was briefed separately.

Participants reported on the whole that they were well briefed for the events prior to attending (over 80% of participants 'strongly agreed' they were well briefed). The University of Exeter did report some people had needed further explanation on the day.

During the first phase dialogue events participants felt they had been given enough information to contribute to the discussion and ask questions (81% strongly agreed): *"The facilitators, experts and hand-outs helped us gain all the information needed."* This reflected a combination of clear specialist presentations and also well-prepared stimulus materials for participants to work with. One specialist commented, *"I was pleasantly surprised by the way everyone was engaged, no one was sitting back, everyone was involved. Especially on a Saturday morning! There was genuine interest, engagement."*

(Specialist Interview). At the final event, participants reported they were given enough information to contribute to the discussion and ask questions (60% strongly agreed, 40% tend to agreed). The number agreeing 'strongly' was lower than in previous events and the few comments given in the exit questionnaires point to

*"I was surprised by the scope of the dialogue, it was very thorough and a lot of care and preparation had gone into the materials presented. I was impressed by the level of detail, organization and facilitation, especially the rapport that Rob Fish had generated."* (Tom Hooper, RSPB)



variability in speaker input, and one to variability in the stimulus material.

Overall participants reported they had been presented with fair and balanced information. This varied between the first phase of events and the final phase. In the first phase 80% strongly agreed, while in the final event, 64% strongly agreed and 33% tended to agree. Specialists concurred with this; 10 strongly agreed and 3 tended to agree. This difference seemed to reflect comments at the second day of the final event that some speakers had been over technical in their presentations. The question of balanced views is something we return to below.

### 2.2.2 Facilitation

Overall the facilitation was seen by participants and specialists to be independent, professional and effective (90% from the first phase of the dialogue and 88% at the final event strongly agreed). For example, *“It was facilitated very professionally throughout and the facilitators made it fun”* and *“I could express my views freely without thinking that I am going against somebody or somebody's preferred ideas. Perfect!”*.

One consequence of strong facilitation was that participants felt their questions were answered (82% strongly agreed in the first phase, 76% at the final event) and that they could contribute their views (38 % tended to agree and 56% strongly agreed at the first event, 88% strongly agreed at the second event).

Some people reported they wanted to say more and felt time was limited, though they recognised that the complexity of the topic meant it would always be limited (e.g. *“don't think we could do it justice over three sessions”*). Observations of the discussions did suggest some were rather rushed and there were times when

*“The facilitators were professional and engaging, every interjection by a member of the public was encouraged.”*  
(Isabel Glasgow, Firth of Clyde Forum)

opportunities for facilitators to push points and get to what lay behind them were potentially lost.

In the interviews with specialists after events, some commented that at the small group level there was some variability in the standard of facilitation. Some facilitators were described as excellent in enabling people to speak and helping debate along, and some less so, appearing not well briefed and also not keeping the group on topic (see below discussion on the relationship between the University of Exeter and Hopkins van Mil).

### 2.2.3 Role of specialists

As discussed above, specialists also reported positively on their experience of the events and felt, on the whole, well briefed and provided with enough information. They also reported that they could ask questions, had time to discuss issues and to contribute to the discussion.

Further, they reported that they felt the input of other specialists was helpful, e.g. one commenting on the input by Prof. Mark Everard wrote: *“Very interesting, engaging and funny. Spoke at a language we understood”*. Indeed, informal feedback from public participants at the events, and in the specialist interviews, point to the valuable role that Prof. Mark Everard had played in making difficult concepts accessible.

All the specialists observed were engaged with participants throughout the day and on the whole struck a useful balance between standing back from the discussion



and being involved.

During the interviews a couple of specialists did say they hadn't entirely understood their role and one had expected to be engaging more with other stakeholders, however, they were not disappointed with the day. Misunderstanding of role is reflected in minor frustration articulated on the final day by some public participants about the input from some specialists, for example, when a direct answer to a question wasn't given by a Defra specialist during a small group discussion. This reflected a differing interpretation of their role: for example, one specialist pointing to seeing their role as offering technical input, rather than opinion and another noting a slight tension between being a participant and stakeholder. Overall this didn't affect the dialogue significantly and one specialist said his misunderstanding was because he hadn't read the briefing materials.

Indeed, at the final event some specialists commented on the level of some presentations by other specialists (e.g.

*"above my intellect"*) and some reluctance to provide views (e.g. *"too on the fence"* and *"no comment"*). Where participants had some concerns over the specialist presentations, this reflects the challenge of asking specialists who are not used to translating their knowledge to a broader audience, to present in this way.

*"The general public are generally more intelligent than government and science give them credit for in terms of getting the basic principles. In some ways, the public viscerally understand the holistic view of nature better than a lot of scientists."*  
(Mark Everard, Scientist).

#### 2.2.4 Participants understanding of the content

Observing the dialogue events, participants were engaging in the ecosystems framework conceptually, as well as applying it to the particular habitat case studies. Particularly relevant here for realising the effectiveness of the process for future dialogues is the feedback from specialists:

- *"I was faced with an educated audience, it was like talking with my professional colleagues."* (Specialist interview).
- *"It really struck me the extent, as the day progressed, delegates seemed to show improvement of their understanding of the concepts as they moved on. Moved from basics to more complex questions."* (Specialist interview).
- *"I was surprised, having done similar presentations to senior managers, that given one day's preparatory work; they got it! It was a complete shock. I assumed it would go over their heads. They were totally engaged and just great."* (Specialist interview).

These comments were not only about the conceptual thinking, they also referred to the public engagement with the case studies. One specialist was impressed by

*"I was impressed by what people had understood. In our work we find it quite a challenge to engage people in an understanding of the environment beyond a preliminary level."* (Specialist, NGO)

*"the way they picked up and understood the issues we've come up against and had to try and deal with",* noting how this felt very different to the usual engagement with particular interest groups. Another said, *"I was*



*surprised how well the public coped with the case studies and the concept. They approached it in a very similar way to how a planner might approach it". (Specialist Interview).*

### 2.2.5 Value of public participation

Participants reported, on the whole, being convinced by the value of public participation, would be involved again and would recommend it to others (over 70% strongly agree from all the events) e.g. *"Overall this was a great and privileged opportunity to understand a very complex issue"*. Similarly, specialists involved at the final event said that taking part had affected their views on public engagement (3 strongly agreed, 4 tended to agree, 2 neither agreed nor disagreed and 2 tended to disagree). Comments pointed to how it has confirmed views about how important this is. Specialists at the final event reported they were convinced of the value of public participation, would be involved again and would recommend it to others (10 strongly agreed, 2 tended to agree).

*"I really enjoyed it and great to hear a range of views from folks. Clearly public dialogue and awareness/education is critical to help inform decisions about nature."*  
(Specialist, Questionnaire)

### 2.2.6 Adapting to question of balance and debate

In line with Sciencewise Guiding Principles<sup>12</sup>, it is important to consider bringing in alternative perspectives and to encourage participants to engage more critically with the issues raised by the topic.

The first stage of the dialogue was generally less focused on presenting alternative viewpoints or the limits of the NEA concepts. While alternative viewpoints were sometimes introduced, there were no specialists who contested the NEA conceptualisation and connotations of commodifying the environment. The issue this raises was whether the public felt able to voice their disagreement. Interestingly the dialogue Final Report evidences how some participants were sceptical about the concept of 'services' at the beginning of the process, though they become less cautious as the project went along. At the same time, some participants felt they experienced a lack of opposition. For example, one commented in an exit survey, *"there was no opposition to the professional viewpoint"* (Survey comment). Similarly, a specialist also remarked *"it felt quite educational and became a bit like wanting to please the teacher"*. What remained unclear was how participants would respond if offered more critical perspectives of the NEA approach from specialists advocating such a perspective from the beginning.

*"The dialogue has been valuable in showing us that what people care about depends on who they are and where they are. There are important cultural influences that go further than just recognizing that the environment does specific things."* (Paul Morling RSPB Head of Economic and Education Policy)

<sup>12</sup> For example, under Scope, Sciencewise Guiding Principles state 'involve a number and diversity of perspectives that is appropriate to the task to give robustness to the eventual outcomes' and under Delivery, 'Provide participants with information and views from a range of perspectives, and encourage access to information from other sources, to enable participants to be adequately informed. Provide participants with information and views from a range of perspectives, and encourage access to information from other sources, to enable participants to be adequately informed'.



At the level of small group discussions, while we observed facilitators encourage people to say what they thought and offer alternative views, there were times when there may have been opportunities to 'dig deeper' into what people were saying. This is important in seeking to understand participants' thought processes and to see how they react to counter arguments and further discussion<sup>13</sup>. Factors that influenced this may have been the amount of material facilitators felt they needed to cover, the extent to which the facilitators needed to be more knowledgeable of the field, facilitators trying to record all the points being made while also facilitating the conversation, and the difficulty of managing dominating voices within the groups (some facilitators were better at this than others). At times the University of Exeter as lead facilitators would offer subtle interventions to the small groups to push the conversation further.

Sometimes there was a risk a facilitator might assume consensus. One specialist commented: *"It was evident some delegates grasped concepts more quickly than others and came through as influencers – whether or not their point was correct. They would bring others along with them. One or two didn't say anything and always agreed with the strong ones"*. Another specialist said, *"Where the mood was positive, it is hard for people feeling more negative to speak up"*. They said the challenge is *"how to wheedle out 'real' views of those just agreeing"* (Specialist interview).

That said, one participant also remarked *"Great we can all debate so well together"* (Survey comment) implying argument had been present. Similarly other specialists comment that they were challenged, e.g. *"a couple were sceptical about what we were trying to achieve"* (Specialist interview). A view articulated by two specialists was that there was little challenge at the conceptual level, though there was when it came to the detail of putting things into practice.

The University of Exeter responded to these issues around offering a balance of plurality of views by redesigning the final stage to include more critical perspectives on valuation, and by ensuring that the analysis captured more divergent views when they arose in the dialogue.

First, the University of Exeter adapted the focus of the final workshop to explore the questions of valuation, which included bringing in specialists to represent alternative perspectives. Overall, the evaluator observed at the event that participants' ability to engage with ecosystem concepts was reinforced at this final event. Participants were engaged in debates in ways that revealed where limitations, contradictions, and overlooked assumptions were. As one specialist commented, the event confirmed:

*"Deliberation matters and having the time, space and conditions in which people can debate their views openly does lead to better substantive argumentation and insights."* (Gary Kass, Natural England)

Several stakeholders pointed to how, through the dialogue, people had learnt to understand the interconnectedness of the environment and the choices about ecosystem services that were all around them:

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<sup>13</sup> For example see Sciencewise Guiding Principles under delivery: 'be deliberative - allowing time for participants to become informed in the area; be able to reflect on their own and others' views; and explore issues in depth with other participants. The context and objectives for the process will determine whether it is desirable to seek consensus, to identify where there is or is not consensus, and/or to map out the range of views.'



*“It was quite salutary how well people grasped the issues. They were so willing to come forward with questions, were enthusiastic to engage in the concepts and have a genuine interest in wanting to understand it all.” (Isabel Glasgow, Firth of Clyde Forum)*

The ability of public participants to engage in the debate was something that surprised many stakeholders:

*“The event was more useful than I had expected. I didn’t think it was possible to bring members of the public along in a way that they could hold a discussion like that, in such depth and talking confidently about concepts such as payments for ecosystems and head versus heart. It was fascinating to listen to the discussions. I’ve never been to an event like that, with people so engaged and with such energy in the room.”(Tom Hooper, RSPB)*

One example given by a stakeholder was peoples’ ability to talk about how the challenges of payment for ecosystem services draw out tensions between ‘head and heart’. On the whole stakeholders felt the balance of views presented on valuation was about right (as demonstrated in the results of the dialogue event exit surveys). One pointed out how important it is to acknowledge to the public that the extreme viewpoints of the debate do exist, knowing that the public can handle those views. Another pointed out how none of the public seemed to have any trouble ‘handling’ the different viewpoints presented. Another said how it was interesting to see the widespread opinions that people expressed. One stakeholder did feel a false dichotomy had been set up between different economic and cultural valuations, though was struck by how, in their view, the public saw straight through that.

Overall, the final event did seem to provide an appropriate response to the question of balance and debate raised in the first interim evaluation report and endorsed by the Oversight Group (July 10<sup>th</sup> 2014). In that report we noted the potential need to offer alternative perspectives in line with Sciencewise Guiding Principles. We also noted the risk of assuming consensus – the different interpretations of the public’s response to valuation highlights again the need for the analysis to demonstrate both shared and divergent viewpoints<sup>14</sup> and this is something that the Final Dialogue Report made explicit.

One stakeholder suggested that at the final event the public could have ‘managed’ a more nuanced debate without being presented with such a dichotomy of views. Indeed, this stakeholder felt there was a lack of nuanced insight, therefore, coming from the group discussions. While this stakeholder felt it would be more ‘respectful’ to the public to offer more sophisticated understanding, this contrasts with other stakeholders who felt that the event reinforced how difficult the public find it to engage in the technical speak and have a relatively ‘low’ starting base of knowledge that informs debate. One stakeholder felt, for example, the public had a ‘poor handle’ on what the Government could do and was doing. Another said this played out in the local examples where people didn’t really understand what was possible, for example around Local Authority responsibilities. An advantage of this project was the recording and full transcription of the group discussions such that the analysis was able to identify and report nuanced differences in the discussion.

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<sup>14</sup> For example see Sciencewise Guiding Principles under delivery: ‘be deliberative - allowing time for participants to become informed in the area; be able to reflect on their own and others’ views; and explore issues in depth with other participants. The context and objectives for the process will determine whether it is desirable to seek consensus, to identify where there is or is not consensus, and/or to map out the range of views.’



## 2.3 Credibility

End of project interviews with the Oversight Group members painted a consistent picture expressing their confidence in the Exeter team and how impressed they were with the quality of the project design, delivery and analysis. These sentiments were echoed by the wider specialists interviewed at the end of the project. Interviewees cited the following key factors that contributed to the credibility of the project:

- Working from clear research questions (as consolidated in the briefing document circulated to the inception meeting) that were also made clear throughout the dialogue process.
- Transparency in demonstrating the logic, design, method and how the results are arrived at, including demonstrating thorough analysis of the process and outcomes of deliberation.
- High quality delivery, including a strong overall dialogue process design and design and delivery of individual events.
- Sustained dialogue over 7 months, in three regions, with an illustrative cross-section of the public consisting of 118 people (committing a total of 341 public participant days) and strong retention throughout the process. The process also benefitted from the involvement of over 40 specialists including NEA scientists, social scientists and representatives of policy delivery bodies and NGOs.
- Thorough approach to data capture and analysis that involved all group discussions being recorded and transcribed in full by an independent transcription company and analysed using qualitative data analysis software.

*“The dialogue was run really well and benefited from involving people who knew the subject really well. That shines through in the way the material was explained and the speed in which people could grasp it.”* (Robert Bradburne, Defra Evidence Team)

From the evaluator’s perspective the adaptability of the project team to respond to the results of the first phase and engage in some more critical debate about valuation also added credibility to the project. Without such engagement, the argument could have been made that the public had only been privy to a pro-ecosystems thinking framework that would influence the insights emerging. Engaging with more critical debates, and paying attention to diversity within the public’s opinions, gives more confidence to the interpretation of the dialogue results.

One stakeholder did raise a question about what is being validated in the dialogue, pointing to the strength being how dialogue can engage people in exploring the relationship and interconnections between economy, well-being and environment, rather than this being the effectiveness of the NEA ecosystems framing per se. To some extent this resonates with the dialogue exit questionnaire comments in which, when asked what they have learnt, rarely did people point explicitly to the ecosystem services concepts, instead tending to refer to their understanding of the environment more generally. On the other hand, other stakeholders have said how impressed they have been at participants’ abilities to engage with the ecosystem services concepts. Looking across the analysis presented in the report, however, and seen within the context of the whole dialogue process, and not just the final event, the conclusions of the report about the public’s reactions to the NEA concept appear valid and are well evidenced (see chapter 3 of the Dialogue Report).



A further point raised by another stakeholder was that, when observing dialogue discussions, the debate barely scratched the surface on some issues, and that the participants didn't have a strong knowledge base to really hold a reasonable conversation or come up with convincing solutions. Had the dialogue been oriented to taking particular decisions, this comment would seem valid. However, since the nature of this dialogue was more concerned with engaging the public in a way of thinking, some of the 'detail' the observer referred to (e.g. who exactly the RSBP were and the role of the National Trust) is less relevant. As the analysis shows, and as supported by the majority of specialists involved in the events, the level of sophisticated engagement was much greater than many specialists anticipated.

## **2.4 Governance**

### **2.4.1 Establishing the project**

It is worth noting some concerns expressed by Oversight Group members about the process of setting up the dialogue, prior to the involvement of the evaluators and appointment of the University of Exeter team. As mentioned already, the original intention of the project as set out in the business case proposed by NERC for a Sciencewise grant, was for a dialogue project to deliver within the timelines and overall work for the NEA-FO project. Some Oversight Group members expressed frustration at this process and suggested that NERC, Defra and Sciencewise need to identify and learn the lessons from this. Others said, while frustrating, that the dialogue following after the NEA-FO wasn't necessarily a problem and also meant it wasn't subsumed within NEA-FO publications.

### **2.4.2 Relationship of University of Exeter to Sciencewise**

On the whole the project team found Sciencewise to be constructive in relation to the development of the dialogue design. Two areas that presented some challenges included:

- Where the Dialogue and Engagement Specialist from Sciencewise had a strong view that differed to other Oversight Group members and partners (e.g. on the practical implications of the dialogue). This leads to questions about the expectation of Sciencewise in relation to input from other stakeholders and what the expectations are for the delivery contractor where there are opposing views or differing views to Sciencewise from other stakeholders.
- The setting up of the evaluation. The funding scheme in this project meant the University of Exeter delivered the dialogue project, as well as commissioned the evaluators. NERC, as the commissioning body for the project, played no role in managing the evaluation process. From an evaluators point of view there were times where it wasn't clear who was 'in charge' of the evaluation and who we were accountable to. This was further complicated by whether the Hopkins van Mil facilitators involved in the delivery of the dialogue should be privy to observational feedback from the evaluators. It is typical in Sciencewise projects for the lead contractor to deliver the dialogue events and so the observation feedback is fed directly back to all the facilitators. In practice, this process was well managed with conversation between the three parties (3KQ, University of Exeter and Sciencewise), however, it did provide the potential for conflict and Hopkins van Mil weren't privy to the observational notes and the benefit this could have provided by way of formative evaluation. Good practice and the desire to avoid conflicts of interest would suggest that NERC could



have usefully commissioned the evaluation so the evaluators were accountable to NERC/Sciencewise rather than the delivery contractor.

### 2.4.3 Relationship between University of Exeter and Sub-contractor (Hopkins van Mil)

In this dialogue project, the University of Exeter were responsible for the design of the dialogue process and supporting stimulus material, and they were the lead facilitators in all of the dialogue events. The University of Exeter led the overall facilitation and convening of the dialogue events – i.e. the whole group discussion – while Hopkins van Mil facilitated the small group discussions according to the agreed design.

Specialist observers and the evaluator did note some variance in the quality of the facilitators and the extent to which ‘conversation’ was being enabled. Hopkins van Mil did report that in the first round of dialogue events, they had found it difficult to deliver a process that they had not been involved in designing. The support facilitators were not always clear in their own minds of the intention of the process and, from the perspective of the University of Exeter, were not always properly prepared. The University of Exeter were not given the opportunity to brief the support facilitators directly, instead briefing the lead who would then brief the other facilitators. Similarly, the University of Exeter were frustrated at times by the lack of understanding of the aims of the dialogue by the support facilitators such that the public discussions were not always developed as well as the University of Exeter anticipated.

In response to requests from Hopkins van Mil, the University of Exeter did consult with them over the subsequent design of the dialogue events. Nonetheless, the process of briefing the support facilitators involved the University of Exeter briefing a lead from Hopkins van Mil who would then cascade this briefing to the rest of the team.

The facilitators appeared more comfortable with the process as time went on, perhaps reflecting their increasing understanding of the material.

Overall, the development of a professional relationship between the University of Exeter and the facilitators, coupled with skilled whole group facilitation by the University of Exeter and, on the whole, skilled small group facilitation by the independent facilitators, meant an excellent dialogue process was delivered.

However, it is worth noting the challenges in sub-contracting a group of support facilitators that do not share the proximity to the project or necessarily the same ethos for public engagement work as the lead delivery contractor: the necessary ‘alignment’ for success needs to be built as the project progresses, taking time and effort, and involving risk.

### 2.4.4 Oversight Group

Under the guidance of Sciencewise, the governance structure of the project involved the formation of an Oversight Group that combined a management and advisory role (see diagram 1, section 1.1.1). The baseline review did indicate some concern that the structure merged the roles of management, advisory and client into one group. Such a structure could lead to

*“The steering group benefited from a good mix of government and academic members who knew each other well and had a level of trust that enabled both wide ranging and focused discussion.”* (Robert Bradburne, Defra Evidence Team)



competing interests compromising the design of the dialogue. However, in practice the Oversight Group worked in a streamlined way and the process benefited from:

- Good rapport and trust across the team that enabled constructive conversations.
- Thorough rationales, briefings and updates being offered by the University of Exeter team which meant continued engagement of the group.
- Extensive liaison by the University of Exeter throughout the project with relevant bodies, including local case study representations in each dialogue area.
- Members of the Oversight Group attending dialogue events and witnessing first hand feedback from participants.

While it is possible to identify the gap in representation from the business sector, a lack of NGOs and more 'critical' voices was to some extent addressed by:

- Bringing in an additional representative as full member of the Oversight Group where a gap had been identified (the RSPB as an NGO body).
- Identifying 'critical friends' who the University of Exeter consult with and who could provide further input remotely in relation to both the dialogue process design as well as content of material.

Indeed, a result of recognising the absence of more critical voices informed the University of Exeter team adapting the final workshop to include more critical reflection on the ecosystems framework, particularly in relation to valuation. Arguably consulting with critical voices in this way may have enabled a more constructive process within the Oversight Group – had more critical voices been involved more directly in the Oversight Group, it may have created unnecessary tensions.



## Part 3 – Evaluation of Outcomes

### 3.1 Dissemination

Outputs from the project include the Final Dialogue Report, executive summary report, and two dialogue films, all hosted on the Valuing Nature website<sup>15</sup>. In addition, the University of Exeter team has also engaged in widespread events that involve a wide range of stakeholders, including academics, policy stakeholders, NGOs and the private sector.

Stakeholders and Oversight Group members interviewed at the end of the project indicated that engagement in workshops had been the key way through which conversations about the implications of the NEA public dialogue work were enabled within their organisations. Indeed, some said these events were more powerful than the written outputs, with the written outputs providing an important reference point of ‘evidence’.

Viewing rates of the project outputs on the project website, provided by the University of Exeter, are captured in the table below:

**Table 8: Viewing rates of project outputs.**

<b><i>Dialogue Pages</i></b>	<b><i>Unique views (as of 31 Jan 2016)</i></b>
Naturally speaking...   Valuing Nature Network	1165
What does nature do for us?   Valuing Nature Network	246
Dialogue film   Valuing Nature Network	203
New report reveals public views on ecosystem services and valuing nature	134
Dialogue Film I: An introduction to the National Ecosystem Assessment Public Dialogue	271 (You Tube – 03 Feb 2016)
Dialogue Film II: An introduction to managing and valuing ecosystem services.	314 (You Tube – 03 Feb 2016)

<sup>15</sup> <http://valuing-nature.net/naturally-speaking>



**Table 9: Dissemination events**

The table below sets out a list of events at which the results of the public dialogue were explicitly presented.

Presentation of Results	Date	Location	Audience/ Number of Participants	
Meeting of the Valuing Nature Programme Executive Board	12.11.14	RCUK, Swindon	Core Funders	C.10
ESRC-NEXUS Workshop on <i>'Environmental values and valuation at the nexus'</i>	28.11.14	Defra, London	Government, business, academic	C.57
Steering Group of the Devon Sustainable Rural Futures Programme	18.12.15	University of Exeter, Devon	Heads of Devon County Council, Dartmoor and Exmoor National Park	C.7
Natural England - Natural Capital Network Workshop <i>The Ecosystem Approach in Practice</i>	7.01.15	Natural England, Foss House, York	Policy delivery/ practice	C.77
Ecosystems Knowledge Network Webinar	05.03.15	Webinar	Policy delivery/ practice	C.44
Academic Seminar	21.02.15	University of Kent	Academic	C.30
Conference: Ecosystem Services: taking the next step	1.06.15	University of Exeter	Regional Policy Delivery/NGOs	C.40
Policy & Practice Seminar: Welsh Government/NRW/ CCW	11.06.15	Welsh Government, Cardiff	National Policy, Evidence and Delivery	C.8
Policy & Practice Seminar: Scottish Gov't/SEPA/SNH	15.06.15	Scottish Gov't Edinburgh	National Policy, Evidence and Delivery	C.25
Policy & Practice Seminar: Defra	23.06.15	London	National Policy and Evidence	C.15



Policy & Practice Conference: The future of conservation in Kent	12.09.15	University of Kent	Public audience Regional Policy Delivery/ Practice/NGOs	C.80
Policy Delivery Workshop - Using ecosystem services to engage people	18.09.15	SEPA, Stirling	SEPA Policy Delivery/ Practice	C.10
Conference IUFRO/OECD: Linking ecosystem services to the livelihoods of local communities -Korea	12.10.15	Seoul, Korea	Academic/NGO Audience	C.50

As an illustrative example of these events and their relevance, the “Policy Delivery Workshop - Using ecosystem services to engage people” for SEPA (15<sup>th</sup> September 2015) is helpful. The purpose of this workshop was to explore opportunities to use ecosystem services to engage different SEPA audiences at different levels in order to promote a change towards more sustainable use of the environment. Presented by Dr. Robert Fish, it used the approach and outcomes from the Naturally Speaking Public Dialogue to stimulate discussion on what approach SEPA should use. The outcome from the workshop is that participants were keen to explore further how ecosystem services could be considered as one of tools that SEPA uses to achieve behavior change. A communication following the workshop said this would involve shifting SEPA’s role towards facilitating people to “discover this for themselves” rather than the broadcast approach to communications.

**Table 10: Further and planned dissemination**

LWEC Policy and Practice Note	Using ecosystem services to frame public engagement and dialogue on environmental issues <a href="http://www.nerc.ac.uk/research/partnerships/lwec/products/ppn/ppn23/">http://www.nerc.ac.uk/research/partnerships/lwec/products/ppn/ppn23/</a>
Academic Papers: 2 of 5 planned academic papers in preparation	Making sense of ecosystem services: insights from an exercise in public dialogue <i>Ecosystem Services</i> ‘It’s all about the money, honey’: what do people make of the valuing nature agenda? <i>Ecological Economics</i>

Overall it is clear there is a high and continuing level of dissemination activity that engages with a broad audience of stakeholders.



## 3.2 Impact

It is worth noting from the outset that the immediate impacts on the participants from the dialogue events were captured in exit questionnaires at the events. For example, one participant wrote they had learnt *“That my voice, opinions and intuitions matter and that I should care how they are developed”*. From the first phase, 70% strongly agreed, and 22% tended to agree, that taking part affected their views on the topic. One wrote

*“I’m looking to volunteer with a group now due to my views changing”*.

This is a powerful result of the project (assuming they do indeed join) and there is some anecdotal evidence of participants becoming engaged in local activities as a result (the project team may be able to substantiate some of these cases further).

*“What always interests me is how people get involved to learn something, not to change anything or make decisions. They said they really wanted to carry on learning, there were no false expectations about changing policy.”*

(Gary Kass, Natural England)

During the baseline review we established various pathways through which impacts could result from this project (see table in appendix). Unlike a dialogue project where there is a clear decision to be reached and a direct policy lead to take the results into policy, there was a general view of the Oversight Group that the value of this project lay in the potential of the results to be pertinent to a wide-ranging policy context and not limited to particular policy context.

Recognising the process of impact will continue, we outline below the broader context in which the project has been of value to date, the impact on implementation, specific impacts and where there are limitations to impact.

### 3.2.1 Broad context

Firstly, in terms of the broader context, several stakeholders pointed to the value of the report:

*“The kind of debates demonstrated in the dialogue point to the importance of understanding nature conservation in the context of choices made in a political-economy rather than as technocratic aspects of habitat protection and biodiversity.”* (Clive Mitchel, Scottish Natural Heritage)

*“Overwhelming, from every social background, was a universally held view that nature in cities was important and the natural environment counts for a lot more than things you can put a pound sign against.”* (Nick Grayson, Birmingham City Council)

This wider thinking did not remain in the abstract, however, with members of Defra and Natural England, for example, pointing to more specific implications of these findings:

*“The dialogue confirmed some things that we knew, while also offering some real nuggets of insight about what does and doesn’t ring true for people. It goes deeper than a poll in demonstrating people’s thought processes. The insights will be useful for our evidence teams and also to inform policy development and implementation.”* (Robert Bradburne, Defra Evidence Team)



*"The rigorous and robust approach to the project means the findings will help address key issues, including how to integrate monetary and non-monetary evidence in policy appraisal and other decision-making." (Simon Maxwell, Defra Evidence Team)*

*"The project findings will feed directly into our Conservation Strategy. They show that through dialogue people can connect with, and value nature. As people engage, they become more passionate and dialogue offers a great methodology for this. It also showed the NEA message can resonate with people if presented in the right way." (Ruth Waters, Natural England)*

It is worth noting that the findings from the project came out shortly after a General Election that limited the extent to which the impact on specific policy programmes could be articulated. Representatives from Defra were very clear, however, that the results of the project would feed directly into different policy initiatives. Indeed, the Defra evidence team were clear that the report was all the more powerful by not offering specific recommendations, instead allowing space for the team to identify where they could draw on the lessons and evidence in relation to different policy agendas. They stated their intention is to look specifically at the implications for Defra though couldn't be specific at the time of interview.

As well as the results of engaging with the NEA being significant, the value of engaging with the public around environmental issues was also noted:

*"Rather than assuming we already know the answers as professionals, the public dialogue report reinforces the importance of engaging people in what interests them and the value of co-production of knowledge and decision making." (Clive Mitchel, Scottish Natural Heritage)*

*"This is a high quality, robust piece of work and so can help make the case for public dialogue and engagement internally and externally." (Simon Maxwell, Defra Evidence Team)*

*"It would help the scientific community to get engaged more and experience the positive feedback from the dialogue. The public dialogue showed that actually there is huge public groundswell of support for what they are doing." (Nick Grayson, Birmingham City Council)*

Other interviewees also expressed how observing this dialogue process and reading the results has inspired them to work with a dialogue process and provide evidence to colleagues about the value of dialogue by demonstrating that the public can engage with complex issues and offer interesting insights. This included NERC who commented on the need to explore where their research initiatives could benefit from dialogue processes. One specialist interviewee said the project had opened their eyes to Sciencewise.

In relation to potential impacts in policy, at this stage the evidence is lacking. While it could be said that this reflects a lack of policy leads engaged in the project, some interviewees also pointed out this is true to some extent of the NEA and NEA-FO as a whole. While significant work went into establishing effective case studies in each dialogue location, obvious policy leads didn't always materialise (an



exception being a presentation to SEPA that was attended by the Chief Executive of SEPA). This is not necessarily a weakness of the project. The nature of the dialogue, and the breadth of issues that the themes of the dialogue speak to, provided a strong basis for cross-department engagement as suggested above by Defra. The implication is that in the future it will be important to identify where the project results do get taken up in relation to specific policy domains. The same is true of providing evidence for the value of open policy making though there is no clear evidence of this at present.

### 3.2.2 Implementation

There is evidence of impacts in relation to implementation of different initiatives. Particularly strong was the way in which the project demonstrated the possibilities for engaging with people with the framework of ecosystems thinking and the NEA:

*“The work of the dialogue demonstrates people with no prior interest were able to get up to speed on complex issues around valuation without reducing it to simply polarized views of intrinsic versus utilitarian values.”* (Clive Mitchel, Scottish Natural Heritage)

*“It’s been really valuable to see how people respond to the ecosystems concepts ‘cold’, that they can see the complexities and liked the way the framework was set out.”* (Nicola Meville, Scottish Environment Protection Agency)

Indeed, in Scotland, one specialist from a government agency reported that people were taking the results very seriously in terms of what they could learn about how to interact more effectively with the public. Other stakeholders echoed this point saying the report offered powerful evidence that can persuade colleagues of the value of dialogue.

Learning how people respond to the concepts of the NEA Framework can help inform discussions about communication with the public. This was partly about demonstrating that the public can engage with discussions about the complexity of the environment, and also about demonstrating that the public respond well to being engaged in this way. In some cases this was about reaffirming a way of working:

*“The dialogue has confirmed something that we’d started to realise about our role in providing cultural services. The report this gives us is an important basis for learning to resonate better in our communications with the public and being more effective in relation to local decision making.”* (Paul Morling RSPB)

The dialogue Final Report offered a way of thinking about the right language to use for different audiences – to find ways to communicate more clearly:

*“This project will help us to find the right language and pitch for talking with the public about nature.”* (Specialist Interview).

*“The NEA Public Dialogue process demonstrated that citizens can fully appreciate these scientific complexities, when they are clearly explained; and are motivated to do so, as it is something they remain almost*



*universally supportive of, especially in urban areas.”* (Nick Grayson, Birmingham City Council)

One specialist said a specific suggestion from the group was worthy of further consideration:

*“They came up with really important suggestions worthy of proper consideration, for example the concept of investment for ecosystem services (rather than payment) and a process of stakeholder decision making that could provide well grounded and informed recommendations to inform government.”* (Tom Hooper, RSPB)

Indeed the public made suggestions around decision-making and governance frameworks that provoked food for thought for the specialists. For example, one group had suggested a protected city budget be established as an Environmental Trust that couldn't be touched by politicians.

Sometimes the results also demonstrated that the NEA approach wasn't right. One specialist said, *“I definitely learned from the day. We are currently scoping some related research and what I saw has helped me in both the targeting and design of it”*. Interestingly though, this was partly realising for them that the language of the ecosystem services for their dialogue events was not going to be helpful for what they wanted to achieve.



### 3.2.3 Specific impacts

Though not the intention of the dialogue per se, there have been two specific areas of impact to date articulated by stakeholders:

- Birmingham City Council involved a cohort of participants from the Birmingham dialogue to act as a sounding board for the development of the community level Natural Capital Planning tool (which gained an Award of Excellence in 2015 by the UK UNESCO Man and Biosphere (MAB) Urban Forum). This tool aims to embed an ecosystems approach to future planning and development not only in the city but also potentially as a future national standard. It is currently being tested on live planning sites across the midlands with a wide range of partners.
- Natural Resources Wales reported that the dialogue had informed practical work they are undertaking in three trial areas eliciting stakeholder views for informing area statements. They described how the method (including asking an uninformed public about their perceptions) and the findings (to help with communication to a broad public) had been useful. They also said the report was informing their knowledge gap about socio-economic evidence in relation to Natural Resource Management and strategic monitoring, within the context of the new Environment Bill in Wales.

There are also a number of areas where there is potential for further specific impact identified by specialists. Whilst it is impossible to know now whether these impacts may occur, it is useful to identify potential future impacts so they can be followed up on in time. The following were mentioned by interviewees:

- Clyde Forum: looking at using the Glasgow panel for a trial dialogue, which would then be supplemented by a wider panel.
- Natural England: see report as relevant to all levels of their work and the dialogue will specifically feed into their strategic thinking and development of their conservation strategy.
- Defra: The findings have the potential to inform future work of the Natural Capital Committee, whose life will be extended at least until the end of this Parliament, and the manifesto commitment to develop a 25-year plan to restore the UK's biodiversity. The project is also expected to inform wider work within Defra's Countryside and Nature Directorate, including the Nature Improvement Programme.
- Scotland: there is an emphasis on service co-production in relation to Public Service Reform, including the Community Empowerment Bill which involves community planning with the support agencies. SEPA, for example, are looking at ways of bringing together community planning with land and water planning, and are interested in how the dialogue work could inform that.
- Natural Resources Wales: Wellbeing and Future Generations Bill involves new local service boards who could find this relevant in terms of findings and methods for integrating social and public goods (including environmental protection, health and quality of life).
- NERC: influencing the Valuing Nature programme.



A further area mentioned by two stakeholders was the opportunity to use the dialogue to inform engagement with the business sector.

### 3.2.4 Routes to impact

In many ways the seeds have been sown for many routes to impact through the extended engagement of stakeholders at local and national levels. Involvement in the public dialogue events impacted on people's assumptions that lead, as we have seen, to inspired and enthusiastic stakeholders. Specialists at the final event stated that they intend to directly make use of and communicate findings to help inform policy and decision making about the environment (8 tend to agree, 3 strongly agree, 1 don't know).

At one level those stakeholders are the routes to impact, the report offering them evidence that adds to their conversations. At another level, the role of the project lead, Dr. Rob Fish, in communicating the findings is clearly crucial, though not something accounted for in the main project funding. Dissemination events were described by interviewees as enabling conversations across groups in ways that allow further conversations to take place that will shape projects, strategies and policy. Indeed, some said the 'report' really provides a backdrop, and the real challenge is how to keep the conversations going through networking events, seminars, and conferences.

It's also worth noting that academic dissemination – through workshops, conferences and publications – may inspire and give credibility to more similar dialogue projects and greater public engagement in research projects.

### 3.2.5 Limits to impact

While there isn't scope to undertake a full-scale analysis of the institutional barriers to policy change and impact, it's worth noting a few comments made by interviewees about more specific challenges:

- Role: some pointed to change in their organisation that meant they would no longer be in a position to engage with the implications of the dialogue in their work or that they no longer had time they could dedicate to such an agenda.
- Organisational structures: some suggested that while often people at 'strategy level' can see the relevance of the findings, and people on the ground can, middle managers charged with tight budgets and strong accountability found it hard to translate messages into actions. This meant sometimes it was difficult to follow through the implications of insights from such projects due to the constraints of finance and accountability.
- Resources: some pointed to the resource intensive implications of the findings i.e. the impossibility of replicating a project on this scale. For example, one specialist reported: *"The big question for me is how to transpose this process that has lead to such good results of understanding, to be replicated at a low cost yet be just as good. It would be wonderful to have recommendations of how we can do that"* (Isabel Glasgow, Firth of Clyde Forum). It is important to note the dialogue wasn't designed with a view to being replicated and rather the intention is that there will be opportunities for a range of stakeholders to make good use of the findings.



- Lack of Policy Ownership: some specialists expressed concern that without a clear ‘decision’ that the dialogue addressed, there wasn’t a clear ‘policy owner’ who would take the findings forward. However, it’s important to note, for example, that Defra’s 25-year plan will cover many of the topics and so there is a clear policy customer.

### 3.3 Costs and Benefits

*“I’m involved in a lot of projects and this one for me has been the best run and most influential for a long time. It provides a really useful piece of evidence based messaging.” (Ruth Waters, Natural England)*

The total project cost was £335,901 which was funded by an award of £318,301 from Sciencewise to NERC to fund the dialogue. Further funding to support the production of dialogue materials (animations) and to enhance impact (notably short films) was secured from the NERC Impact Accelerator Account (£10,600) plus funding by the University of Exeter (£7,000); a total of an additional £17,600. Part-funding of the equivalent of £516,000 was provided through the follow-on phase of the UK NEA, especially the work packages particularly relevant to the public dialogue exercise. Following a targeted call to undertake the dialogue, the University of Exeter, led by Dr. Rob Fish (Principal Investigator) was awarded an NERC grant of £318,301 to lead the public dialogue (award number NE/L013894/1). The cost involved reflects in part the size of the panel involved and the number of dialogue events, and also the commitment to undertake analysis of transcribed materials by a full-time researcher.

We can anticipate further indirect costs involved in the project including the specialist days contribution and contributions by Oversight Group members (including time reading materials, travel, comments and attendance). These are equivalent to a total of 106 person working days (42 specialists + 64 members of the Oversight Group). As an indicative figure, if £500 was allocated for each day contribution, this would amount to £53,000.

Further still, in addition to the funding given, it is important to recognise the additional costs of delivering the programme. Dr. Rob Fish reported that time spent engaging stakeholders (for example for case studies) and in disseminating the research was not accounted for within the project budget. Research time can be difficult to pin down and time spent in the analysis and writing-up phases was also likely to have been more than the budgeted costs.

The total cost of the project, therefore, can be stated to be approximately £335,901 (or £388,901 with the indirect costs indicated above).

Asked about the cost effectiveness of the project, stakeholders and the Oversight Group praised:

- The high quality of the dialogue – several interviewees said it was the best they had seen.
- The high quality of the report and analysis – again several interviewees said this was the best they had seen.
- The scale of the dialogue, which was something for which a single agency would have struggled to raise the resources.



- That the project had provided new insight and has the potential to influence future policies that could save significant sums of money (through quality policy delivery).

One interviewee said the value of the project lay in the 'high level' thinking it offered and provoked, and that cost effectiveness was therefore difficult to assess without specific policy outputs. Another said that in many ways it was too early to make a formal assessment.

Two stakeholders did express concern in the interviews that such an expensive dialogue had no direct policy outcome.

From an evaluator point of view, context is important here. While the dialogue was large by Sciencewise standards, from the perspective of NERC as a research council, this was the equivalent of a small grant and the level of engagement was therefore seen as high. Indeed, within the context of the total NEA funding of £3million+, the project costs are relatively marginal and yet offer considerable insights for both research and policy.

### 3.4 Lessons and Reflections

Lessons emerging from the public dialogue regarding the NEA are captured within the Final Dialogue Report itself. In this evaluation report, we focus on the lessons for conducting dialogues in the future. Rather than posing definitive prescriptions that override context, it seems sensible to identify the questions that future dialogues might want to ask, based on the experience of this project.

- *How focused on a specific decision or outcome does a public dialogue need to be?* There is learning here in terms of the assumption sometimes articulated by Sciencewise that, to be of value, the dialogue needs to be focused on something contentious or a decision that needs to be made. If a narrow view of impact is taken in which there is a linear relationship between the dialogue and policy decision, then a narrow approach to the focus of the dialogue would be right. However, there are stages in policy cycles where a broader range of issues and ideas can be considered that are not directed to a particular decision that needs to be taken. In the case of this dialogue, while there was ownership of the project within Defra, the absence of an immediate or specific policy decision to be taken has also been the very strength of the project in relation to breadth of potential impact and interest. The idea articulated by members of the Oversight Group that there was a genuine need to learn, before even starting to think about policy implications, seems to have opened the way for the findings to resonate across a broad range of audiences (note for example the extensive dissemination activities). Indeed, several stakeholders said that, had the project been more prescriptive of the implications, the findings might well have been dismissed more quickly if they didn't fit into existing agendas. By contrast, the dialogue has provoked debate that, as we have seen, specialists and stakeholders suggest provides insights that could continue to have an impact in years to come.
- *How do you know if you have the right balance of views?* There are a number of areas in relation to this project where balance needed to be addressed, and, as we discussed above, this was done effectively. There are three elements in relation to balance that we can identify here. One is the extent to which the governance structure of the project enables more critical voices to be heard in the design of the process. Here we saw how the Exeter team sought critical input from



key advisors outside meetings, though no 'critical' voices sat on the Oversight Group. The value of such voices would have been to enable better consideration of the extent to which balance was being achieved. The second aspect is in relation to delivery. In this project the Oversight Group were cautious about the involvement of more critical voices in the dialogue with a view to how the debate might be 'hijacked' and become focused on a particular issue to the detriment of wider considerations. The University of Exeter persuaded the Oversight Group of the value of bringing in alternative perspectives at the final event. When it comes down to the credibility of the results, however, we do need to bear in mind that without evidence that the public have heard a diversity of viewpoints, there may be a risk that the public dialogue conclusions would not appear to be fully reflective of how the public might respond to the debate at large. The third aspect is in relation to how well views are captured by support facilitators and the implications for assuming what the public thinks (see next point).

*What is the best emphasis to have when recording small group discussions?* This question arises from observations of the dynamics of the group discussion in relation to the practices of recording comments on flip charts. While we recognise there are broader methodological issues here, one argument for using flip charts is to demonstrate to participants that what they say is important. However, the evaluator also observed that such a practice can stifle the group discussion as the facilitator turns to write-up a point made and the opportunity to explore the points more deeply can be lost. In thinking about the best way to hold and record the group conversation it is really important to be clear on whether the primary aim is to capture key points made, to enable a flow of conversation, to facilitate learning, or to identify points of difference.

One of the strengths of this project was the use of the recordings to transcribe the results which meant more nuanced detail could be picked up. Though costly, given the potential for misrepresentation, such recording adds considerable credibility to the process. Used with confidence, it would also enable facilitators to engage directly with the group discussion, knowing the discussion is being captured. The value of participants' contribution can be acknowledged by a deeper engagement with what they are saying, and so also allowing the participant to develop what they are saying. Indeed, it would seem when all articulated thoughts are being captured on a flip chart, there is little room for someone to express an unfinished thought or think through an issue out loud without it being captured. This could be explored by Sciencewise using transcripts from this project to further analyse the relationship between the discussion and the facilitation process with a view to informing the pros and cons of different methods and how social science and dialogue methodologies can learn from each other.

- *What is the best way to manage the relationships and responsibilities between the project lead, facilitators, design and delivery?* As we have noted, there were some frustrations at early stages of the project. These were well worked through and led to an effective dialogue overall. The points of learning revolve around both parties being clear on expectations about involvement in design of the process and the need for effective briefings. In this project, the model was that the Exeter team led the design and talked this through with a lead facilitator who then briefed the rest of the team. As the project evolved Exeter simplified the questions to make it easier for the facilitators to deliver them but also facilitators got more familiar with the philosophy of the discussions and the project as a whole and therefore they were more equipped to deliver the process design. However, the briefing arrangement remained the same. It would seem, in the future, the briefing process ought to involve direct communication between the



process designer and all facilitators to avoid the risk of a cascading of the message in ways that key points and expectations are lost.

- *Who is the evaluator accountable to?* The nature of the funding arrangement on this project meant the evaluator, rather than being contracted by the commissioning body (NERC), was contracted by the delivery contractor (University of Exeter). For the Exeter team there were some frustrations in therefore having to manage their own evaluation process (including the time involved in contracting, etc.). From an evaluator point of view there were also times where it wasn't always clear who we were accountable to, though in practice we acted in our communications in a way that maintained liaison with both Exeter and Sciencewise. The risk here is having different people to respond to – 'two bosses' in effect – and also in potentially being compromised by evaluating the practices of the body that has commissioned you.

### 3.5 Conclusions

Overall, and consistent with Sciencewise Guiding Principles, the evidence suggests the dialogue has met its objectives, been credible and has created an effective engagement process with participants. This reflects excellent project governance, exemplary implementation, a broad input of 'expert' perspectives and active engagement with stakeholders throughout. There are also signs of impact and potential impact that range from locally specific implications to broader policy debate.

Major achievements of this project were:

- Exemplary project management, including keeping the Oversight Group fully engaged (as well as other stakeholders).
- High quality delivery, including a strong overall dialogue process design and design and delivery of individual events.
- Sustained dialogue over 7 months, in three regions, with an illustrative cross-section of the public consisting of 118 people (committing a total of 341 public participant days) and strong retention throughout the process. The process also benefitted from the involvement of over 40 specialists including NEA scientists, social scientists and representatives of policy delivery bodies and NGOs.
- Conclusions that were seen to be robust because of rigorous analysis based on independent transcriptions of recorded dialogue discussion, notably enabling the analysis to identify and report nuanced differences in the discussion.
- A thorough and rich report based on robust findings.
- Results that cover a wide range of issues that will appeal to a wide range of stakeholders at national and local level.
- Widespread and targeted dissemination activities reaching a wide range of stakeholders.

Impact has been an important part of the project. Immediate impacts on the participants from the dialogue events were captured in exit questionnaires at the events. In terms of broader context, stakeholders pointed to the value of the dialogue to inform their thinking in ways that have specific implications to inform policy and strategy. There is evidence of impacts in relation to implementation of



different initiatives. Particularly strong was the way in which the project demonstrated the possibilities for engaging with people with the framework of ecosystems thinking and the NEA. There were also specific impacts of the public dialogue identified by stakeholders. The nature of the dialogue report means there are likely to be continued impacts that extend beyond the timeframe of this evaluation.

There are some key lessons to be explored around the extent to which dialogue processes are tied to specific decisions, how balance is maintained, the best way to record small group discussions, and how to ensure appropriate lines of accountability are set up.

The evaluators thank everyone who participated in the evaluation for their time and openness in answering questions and discussing the project, and their support throughout.