

Case Study

Nature Improvement Areas

A public dialogue on landscape management

Vital statistics

Commissioning body:

Natural England

Duration of process:

2 years, 1 month: March 2013 – March 2015

Total public participants involved:

434

Total stakeholders involved:

Three NIAs

Total experts involved in events:

Three facilitators plus local NIA teams

Cost of project:

£567,000 total
Sciencewise funding = £226,000

Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) were introduced as a concept by the Natural Environment White Paper to enhance and reconnect nature on a significant scale in England, and to put communities at the heart of devolved and local decision-making.

Following a competitive process, the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) identified a total of 12 NIAs in 2011 and 2012. The successful NIAs were awarded funding from Natural England to deliver an agreed programme of work, which included community engagement and outreach. In 2012, Sciencewise developed a funding advice package to support those people involved in the NIAs who were particularly keen to apply for support from Natural England to run a public dialogue project as part of their wider work to engage communities, understand local needs and improve their local natural environment.

The overarching aim of an NIA public dialogue project was 'To support Natural England, Defra and partners to use public dialogue in local decision-making for the development of integrated biodiversity, landscape and ecosystems policy and practice, within the context of localism and Big Society.'

The following three NIAs applied for this funding and were successful:

- Meres and Mosses NIA in Shropshire and Cheshire
- Morecambe Bay Limestones and Wetlands NIA in Lancashire and Cumbria
- Nene Valley NIA in Northamptonshire.

Policy maker view

“It has proved the approach works, which was the main objective for us.”

Natural England

Influence on policy and policy makers

The most immediate practical impacts of the NIA public dialogue project were at a local level, within the three local dialogue projects.

The Meres and Mosses NIA

The project significantly increased the understanding of this NIA's team members about public dialogue and shifted how they viewed public engagement more broadly. They also now value asking open, in-depth questions to a smaller sample of the public rather than always engaging a larger number in a more superficial way. One NIA staff member said 'it has fundamentally changed the way in which we approach communities for the better'.



Bart Donato/Natural England

The public dialogue also resulted in five key recommendations for the NIA covering:

- Education and learning to raise awareness of the needs and role of nature in sustaining and enhancing the Meres and Mosses, and to start bringing about behaviour change in relation to choices made by public, private and community organisations and the local population
- Providing support and encouragement to modern farm businesses interested in exploring alternative approaches to sustaining their livelihoods and undertaking appropriate levels of environmental stewardship
- Making the planning system work better for people and nature including reviewing how the NIA partnership, and other people and organisations could interact and become involved more effectively with the planning system
- Branding and marketing the Meres and Mosses. The dialogue found considerable pride was taken in the Meres and Mosses as a landscape area, particularly one that contains such ecological jewels, but few local people were aware of how special the area is
- Effective localism and greater influence for the NIA itself, based on local knowledge and priorities, and facilitating the interpretation and delivery of national policies in ways that are beneficial to the NIA.

Each of these recommendations included specific actions for the NIA team to undertake. The first action taken by the team as a consequence of these recommendations was to arrange meetings with the local planning authority to discuss how they could best engage with planning applications.

The project also created a number of products that are seen to have significant potential to impact others in future. In particular, a film promoting the landscape and a tour based on Google Earth™ mapping service that enables the landscape to be explored virtually. Both these products are valued highly by the NIA team.

[The Morecambe Bay Limestones and Wetlands NIA](#)

The project created a number of products that conceptualised the results of the deliberations with local people and provided opportunities for future actions in the following three areas:

- The Winmarleigh Moss dialogue report is an evidence base on public views and concerns about the restoration of the bogs in this area, including the perceived risk of flooding
- The engagement work at Nichols Moss highlighted the problems and ways forward on multi-ownership landscapes where restoration is planned
- The work in the Lyth Valley created a positive approach that was pro-nature and pro-farming.

More generally, the dialogue eased the anxieties, misunderstandings and confusion that existed in relation to planned changes to landscape and water management. Although some scepticism remained, the project increased the level of buy-in from local landowners and members of the public, and created platforms for future dialogue. This was a notable change from previous discussions, which had been dominated by controversy and lack of progress. In the words of a Natural England representative 'there is clearly more dialogue work to do to take Nichols Moss and the Lyth Valley sites forward, but the dialogue work has initiated them well.'

Other activities that were expected to lead to later impacts included the 'Aren't Bogs Brilliant?' art project, which funded an artist to work with a local primary school to develop an art installation on Foulshaw Moss, bringing over 60 parents and others to the site.

The Nene Valley NIA

Two community panels were organised, which led to the production of vision statements and action plans for two important sites within the NIA's Special Protection Area. These plans were developed with members of the community, and were positively received and endorsed by the NIA partnership:

- The panel working on Northampton Washlands created an action plan covering the future management of the site including two options that addressed the most critical issue of dog disturbance to wildlife; and volunteer involvement, surveillance of anti-social behaviour on the site and the role of the site in flood management. The NIA board agreed to take these forward
- The panel working on Summer Leys and Mary's Lake created an action plan including joining the two sites together in public ownership, actions for better site supervision, establishing a friends' group (since set up and running) and improved access.

Wider benefits of whole NIA dialogue programme

Beyond the impacts and learning at a local level, the following wider benefits were realised across the whole NIA programme:

- Building the capacity of Natural England staff to understand and oversee public dialogue. One staff member said 'we convinced and educated a number of people about the nature, value and importance of good dialogue'
- Raising awareness across all 12 NIAs about public dialogue, through presentations to the NIA conference in September 2014 and an NIA Best Practice conference in February 2015. Combined, these two events set out the work undertaken and the benefits of having dialogue with the public. Informal feedback from participants to the presenters was positive
- Participating in the national experiment of local decision-making and playing an active part in an experiment of how best to do this.

Key messages from the participants

The Meres and Mosses NIA

Before taking part in the dialogue, most people were unaware of quite how rare and threatened some of the habitats and species are, and, consequently, were unaware of a need to intervene. A consistent message received from participants in feedback after the dialogue project had finished was that educators should place greater emphasis on understanding local ecological systems and how policies need to be followed to protect them.

Participants also expressed a desire for improved balance between very local approaches to planning, wider green infrastructure management and national priorities. They felt the NIA should present a clear vision and its membership should provide an appropriately influential layer of governance to enable it to have more 'clout'.

The Morecambe Bay NIA

Four themes emerged from the discussions with public participants involved in these dialogue projects:

- **Permissions** – many members of the public were keen to know that the restoration works would observe all due process and legal requirements
- **Tree felling** – there were concerns about how tree felling and disposal would be managed, why the proposed volume of tree felling was needed and how any increase in flooding arising from the restoration works would be managed.
- **Wildlife** – local people were interested to know the impacts on existing species and were particularly interested in the 'trade-offs' in terms of wildlife likely to be lost or displaced by the changes to a local moss in return for species that would benefit / be encouraged by the work
- **Water movement** – this was the most significant area of concern for members of the public. Local people asked for further information regarding the impacts on surrounding land.

The Nene Valley NIA

The messages from participants here revolved around policies to protect sites by controlling access. Key messages included concerns about access for dog walkers in light of poor behaviour from a minority, anti-social use of the site, clarity over anglers' access to the lakeside and how good management could be ensured as visitor numbers increased.

Dialogue projects activities

The key objectives of the project overall were:

- To embed public dialogue in the NIA planning process
- To embed public dialogue in national policy learning from NIAs.

Dialogue approaches and activities varied across the three projects, based on the specific local context.

The Meres and Mosses NIA

Meres and mosses are wetland features of glacial origin. They are geographically discrete, lowland open water (ponds and meres) and peatland sites (bogs and mosses), punctuating a thick layer of glacial till covering much of the Shropshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire Plain.

The public dialogue project aimed to be a deliberative process – gathering evidence and understanding the views of the public. The NIA team members identified that the dialogue project could help them understand the views of the public by asking participants ‘What do you value and think is special about your local landscape?’

It was intended that this very open question would lead on to identifying problems and opportunities, and identifying those groups and individuals willing to take action and those requiring greater support.

There was a series of sequential dialogue activities within this NIA, enabling them to explore broad options around the management of their landscape before narrowing down on particular topics of interest. Initial scoping activities included a survey of around 260 people and a stakeholder workshop. After this, more focused discussions were held at a series of 10 public dialogue workshops (with around 100 participants in total). This was followed by a series of stakeholder and mixed participant dialogue workshops. Written final reports and a film were produced.

The Morecambe Bay NIA

Morecambe Bay NIA is based on the limestone and wetland areas around Morecambe Bay. The area is a UK biodiversity hotspot with a unique transition of priority coastal and freshwater wetlands; limestone pavements, grasslands and woodlands; a wealth of designated wildlife sites (over 30% designated as sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs)/local wildlife sites); and many high-quality, non-designated sites.

The project aimed to help the NIA team to achieve its ambition of enhancing conservation and encouraging shared visions for nature – focused around two key topics:

- The restoration of lowland raised bogs
- The need to develop a shared vision of future management of natural assets in the Lyth Valley in Cumbria, prompted by likely changes in the management of water in the area.

Underpinning these issues was the need for informed conversations around the increased risk (actual or perceived) of flooding or wetting of land. The public dialogue focused on a number of engagement activities concurrently, each focusing on one of four specific sites in the area.

Activities included public and stakeholder dialogues on the restoration of Winmarleigh Moss; developing a future vision for nature and farming in the Lyth Valley; an art installation on a wildlife reserve produced by local primary school children; and local engagement on the approach to restoration of Nichols Moss.

The Nene Valley NIA

The Nene Valley encompasses a wide range of natural habitats, mainly in Northamptonshire, and supports various forms of wildlife. The Nene Valley NIA aims to recreate and reconnect natural areas along the River Nene and its tributaries from Daventry to Peterborough.

The aim of the public dialogue project was ‘to engage local people in meaningful dialogue about the NIA and relevant policies’. It was hoped that the project would give local people a sense of ownership in finding solutions to address access issues in the NIA, thus contributing to the sustainable delivery of those solutions during and beyond the end of the original NIA funding period from Defra.

The dialogue project team also ran a range of engagement activities simultaneously, including:

- Two community panel processes to develop action plans for local areas of ecological importance – the 12 members of the Washlands Panel met five times; and the 14 members of the Summer Leys/Mary’s Lake Panel met six times and ran a survey and guided walk
- A dedicated website incorporating interactive mapping and space to engage in discussions with the public. A photo competition was also held
- Training and guidance on public dialogue for other interested organisations
- There was also wider engagement with youth and community groups primarily through two events – PloverFest (family events to engage local people), and an arts project examining local perceptions of the Nene Valley NIA and how it is used.

What worked especially well

The Meres and Mosses NIA

The dialogue activity included stakeholders and the public in an iterative way. This was planned and delivered in sequential stages, with:

- A stakeholder workshop to explore scenarios for landscape management, and discuss what the public could influence, as well as what stakeholders wanted to know about public attitudes
- A round of 10 public dialogue workshops to hear and explore a range of public views from over 100 public participants
- A stakeholder workshop, and a mixed stakeholder/public workshop, to reflect on and discuss the public views and the results of the dialogue.

The intertwining of stakeholders and public seemed to give credibility to the dialogue in the eyes of the NIA team as it built awareness of the dialogue, set the public discussion in the reality of the stakeholders’ lives and returned the results of the public dialogue back to the stakeholders. This was a logical and useful structure for the dialogue to take and appeared to work well.

The Morecambe Bay NIA

It took some time for local ownership of the project to build and one of the breakthrough steps was the facilitator identifying a specified lead person at each of the four sites. The facilitator worked directly with each of these four leads, who then felt direct ownership of the discussions and were empowered to carry out actions and had the time to do the work. Identifying these four leads was 'critical to getting momentum and progress'.

The Nene Valley NIA

The flexibility of the project team in dealing with various delays was key to ensuring the process stayed on track and allowing the work to move at the appropriate pace for the NIA without creating discomfort and unease.

The delivery of the two community panels was well planned, well structured and had the ability to adapt depending on how the meetings developed and who was in the room. As well as strong planning and facilitation, the successful delivery of the panels owed much to key partners being in attendance and providing a sense of commitment to the outcomes, which was valued by the public participants:

“I think it gave them a sense they were being valued for their knowledge. I would hope people really got that sense of their contributions being valued.”

What worked less well

The main lessons from this project are based on common problems experienced at all three local NIAs and the work at national level:

- **A more appropriate funding process for the public dialogue support**, that provides greater clarity and detail in the invitation to local NIAs to bid for funds, a longer bidding process which includes a 'scoping' phase and support to NIAs. Ideally, had the timing been conducive, this process would have been integrated with the overall funding application process for NIA support. In particular, greater clarity was needed around the definition of what public dialogue is and is not, shared among all those involved; funding and staffing requirements; and governance arrangements such as using a local steering group and updates to the NIA partnership groups to boost ownership. This was the single most important lesson from the project
- **Clearer arrangements for national and local management**, to improve the opportunities for sharing learning across the local NIA projects. When these were established, local steering groups helped delivery
- **Clarity over expectations of local projects within a national project**. There was some confusion, leading to dissatisfaction, over issues such as the definition of 'public' participants (and stakeholders), what counts as public dialogue (e.g. art projects), timescales, staff resources and funding.

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Reports

Full project and evaluation reports available from Sciencewise on www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/nature-improvement-areas