

Nature Improvement Areas Best Practice Event - Connectivity

Date 24th- 25th February 2015 **Start time** 12 pm 24 Feb **Finish time** 4pm 25 Feb

Location [Birmingham Botanical Gardens, B15 3TR](#)

Aim and Purpose

A key recommendation from the Making Space for Nature report (2010) was '*... we need a step-change in our approach to wildlife conservation, from trying to hang on to what we have, to one of large-scale habitat restoration and recreation, under-pinned by the re-establishment of ecological processes and ecosystem services, for the benefits of both people and wildlife.*' This was further developed in the Natural Environment White Paper and the Biodiversity 2020 strategy in 2011.

Nature Improvement Areas were announced in the Natural Environment White Paper to take forward the aspirations for ecological restoration detailed in the Making Space for Nature Report, with England's initial twelve NIAs beginning work on 1 April 2012.

Increasing the connectivity of England's ecological network is only one of the things we need to do if we are to stop the seemingly inexorable decline in the numbers of many species, and the continuing loss of valuable wildlife habitats. NIAs and others have addressed the challenge of connectivity and made significant progress both in terms of practical actions and contributions to research.

The purpose of this event was to take stock of what each of the initial twelve NIAs have delivered in relation to connectivity, the national and international context, and other illustrations of how to restore ecological networks and enhance our understanding and engagement with the natural environment. This will aid policy development, future activity and be shared across national and international partners.

Synopsis: Connectivity, Curry and NIA Best Practise

Over 60 people from the 12 Nature Improvement Areas along with NE, EA Forest Research, Defra, and others took part in the latest NIA Best Practise Network event held in Birmingham over the 24th and 25th February. The event was held at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens, an excellent location both in terms of its four spectacular glasshouses spanning from tropical rainforest to arid desert climates and also its historical connection with nature conservation from the Victorian era.

The focus of the event was Connectivity, a key part of the now familiar Better, Bigger, More and Joined mantra that currently echoes across policy areas from environment to transport planning and beyond. The programme and ambition set in NEWP and Biodiversity 2020 reaches a critical milestone with the end of the funded period now imminent. However as the current Minister for the Environment said... "this is not the beginning of the end, it is the end of the beginning". Each NIA has the shared ambition of continuing the work to establish functional and resilient ecological networks across England and to inspire and inform others through the sharing of approaches and best practise.

Through a series of presentations, workshops and site visits, the event provided an opportunity to share experiences and best practice and to influence future activity and policy development in this important area. There were also ample opportunities for networking and each NIA presented a poster demonstrating their significant contributions to better, bigger and more connected ecological networks and the extent of their achievements through the three year Defra and NE funded programme.

NE's Nick Macgregor was the first speaker welcomed to the floor by the NIA Programme Manager Brian McDonald – Nick's talk was titled Connectivity: Beyond the fragments: from sites to ecological networks and explored examples and illustrations across national and international areas.

Reflecting on recent national and international context Nick explored the science and evidence supporting the landscape scale approach, and concluded (tentatively) ...

- Site quality/characteristics are crucial – **make sure that ‘habitat creation’ is really providing habitat**
- Relative importance of other factors varies across species (surprise!) but any ‘bigger’, ‘better’, ‘more’ or ‘joined’ helps
- Bigger/more aggregated patches seem beneficial for a wide range of taxa
- Structurally diverse mosaics of vegetation/other land cover across the landscape seem a good idea

A number of speakers from the NIAs presented and detailed their actions along with a look at water management by the Environment Agency and its contribution to NIAs. This was followed with an interactive session led by NE’s Rebecca Jackson-Pitt, with Dr. Chloe Bellamy of Forest Research and Dr Jenny Hodgson of University of Liverpool. This session looked into practical examples of modelling and measuring ecological connectivity and made practical contributions to the evolving NIA Monitoring and Evaluation as well as exploring the practical steps needed to develop coherent and resilient ecological networks optimising ecosystem services for wildlife and people.

The last speaker on the first day was Professor Ian Trueman of Wolverhampton University, a pioneer of the urban ecology movement who provided an interesting, amusing and thoughtful reflection on how the city-region approach by the Birmingham and Black Country had already in three years developed and progressed enhancements and creation to transform the gritty urban fabric of the area to a more natural setting re-establishing the rich natural tapestry underlining the industrial and post-industrial fabric of the area. The first day was rounded off by excellent curries.

The second day started with a visit to sites (including Ley Hill Park and Woodgate Valley Nature Park) across the Birmingham and Black Country NIA, seeing examples of transformational projects and meeting some of the partners, volunteers and representatives of the 43 friends of groups this NIA has enabled to take action to improve their local environment and bringing to life the bigger, better and joined part of their delivery (see: <http://www.bbcwildlife.org.uk/NIA>)

The afternoon session of the event:

- explored the agricultural landscape of the Marlborough Downs and the *fabulous* social network that has developed alongside the enhanced ecological network. NE’s James Philips outlined the powerful potential of the new Countryside Stewardship Wild Pollinator and Farm Wildlife Package.
- The Business Innovation and Skill Dept. (BIS) led Sciencewise programme has been working with three NIAs around enhanced public dialogue. A presentation by Catrin Ellis Jones of Dialogue by Design highlighted the benefits and transformation of previously rigid perceptions to improve collaboration and enhance understanding of activity. A short film produced by the Meres and Mosses NIA was premiered and formed part of the public dialogue work (you can see it here: <https://vimeo.com/120148400>).
- In the spirit of joined up cross government working (NEWP commitment 32) NE’s Nick White and Clare Warburton outlined and illustrated the work underway with the Highways Agency and Network Rail with the Morecambe Bay and Humberhead Levels NIA. This has Secured **£3-4m delivery commitments** from Network Rail and Highways Agency in the 2 NIAs for 2015-2017 and informed and influenced the Roads Investment Strategy **£300million environment fund with NIAs identified as target areas for biodiversity interventions**. This transformational approach has realised both from the need of the industry to manage impacts but also as the opportunity to secure win-wins from development and the joined up dialogue and strategic brokering the NIAs can provide at the landscape scale, a great illustration of the opportunity NIAs can provide to provide more for the natural environment in a joined up way.
- An open floor discussion took place around Spatial planning and ecological networks which identified there was no one master recipe for success but NIAs planning their ecological networks provide a coherent offer to land use planning in identifying what needs to be protected and enhanced and where best to target planning gain strategically and to maximum effect.

NE’s Brian McDonald summed up the two days activity and introduced Defra’s new policy lead for NIAs, Kim Martin who will be working with the programme as it evolves through the next phase of activity to 2020. Both Defra and NE have confirmed their ongoing commitment to support NIAs over

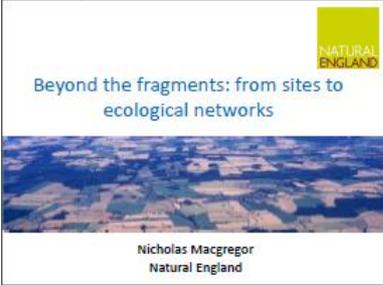
the coming years by maintaining staff input to coordinate activity nationally and local area team input to support individual partnerships and target resources through Countryside Stewardship for instance. Alongside securing resources from businesses, communities, research/academia, developers, other government departments, progressing the joined up action needed to restore and create resilient ecological networks at the landscape scale. Thanks to the Birmingham and Black Country NIA, Rebecca Jackson Pitt and Judith Milne who helped make the event a success

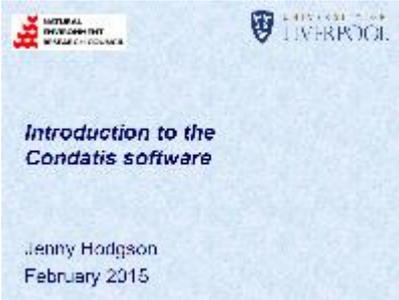


Brian McDonald
NIA Programme Manager

Agenda

Day 1: Structural and Functional Connectivity

Item	Description	Owner	Time
1	Arrival, lunch and posters (See posters [1] to [10])		12:00
2	Welcome, introduction and outline for the event	Brian McDonald, Natural England	13.15
3	Connectivity: Beyond the fragments: from sites to ecological networks  See Presentation [1]	Dr Nicholas Macgregor, Natural England	13.25
4	Delivering landscape scale conservation: What does it mean in the Meres & Mosses?  See Presentation [2]	Matt Jones, M&M NIA	13.50
5	Targeting, Buffering and Habitat connection  See Presentation [3]	Martin Wain, Morecambe Bay NIA	14:10
6	Puzzling through Connectivity and placing it in Partnership decision-making  See Presentation [4]	Dr Tim Graham, Humberhead Levels NIA	14:30

7	<p>River and Catchment Connectivity</p>  <p>Nature Improvement Areas Best Practice Event</p> <p>Research Meeting Garter Aodach – National Biodiversity Team</p>  See Presentation [5]	Dr Richard Handley, Environment Agency	14:50
8	Break for Tea/refreshment and posters (See Posters [1] to [10])		15:10
9	<p>Workshop session: Connectivity Approaches in Practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduction to the Condatis Software  <p>See Presentation [6]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Measuring connectivity and applying the outputs: examples from Forest Research  <p>See Presentation [7]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Round table discussion considering approaches to modelling and measuring connectivity in relation to planning for delivery and monitoring & reporting Feedback/plenary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rebecca Jackson-Pitt, Natural England Dr Jenny Hodgson, University of Liverpool Dr Chloe Bellamy, Forest Research All attendees 	15:25
10	<p>Connectivity in an Urban Context Birmingham and Black Country NIA</p>  <p>Improving connectivity in Birmingham and the Black Country</p> <p>Ian Trueman</p>   See Presentation [8]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professor Ian Trueman, University of Wolverhampton 	16:30
11	Discussion		16:55
12	Details for evening dinner and next days' site(s) visit		17:15

Day 2: Beyond Structural and Functional – connecting with people, places and planning

1	Meet at Botanical Gardens for coffee		09:00
2	Site Visits – looking at sites and connectivity activity in the Birmingham Black Country		09.30 – 12.00
3	Lunch at Birmingham Botanical Gardens		12:30
4	Connectivity across an agricultural landscape – Rediscovering our rural community the Marlborough Downs Experience 	Dr Jemma Batten, MD NIA	13:30
		See Presentation [9]	
5	Wild Pollinator & Farm Wildlife Packages: <i>Managing for farmland biodiversity across lowland England within Countryside Stewardship</i> 	James Phillips Natural England	13:50
		See Presentation [10]	
6	Connecting with people, places and planning – how public dialogue can help 	Dr Catrin Ellis Jones, Dialogue by Design	14:10
		See Presentation [11]	
7	Transport Corridors – connecting with infrastructure and others agendas 	Nick White/Clare Warburton, Natural England	14:30
		See Presentation [12]	
9	Interactive session exploring individual NIAs links with the planning system		15:10
10	Next steps and final questions		15:45
11	Close		16:00