

Notes from discussion on the issues surrounding Defra's White Paper
- An invitation to shape the Nature of England Discussion Document

Little Wittenham, 14th October 2010

For the first time in 20 years Defra is producing a White Paper on the Natural Environment (Spring 2011). At the moment they are asking for the general public and organizations to comment on their discussion document. The discussion document consists of 15 questions. www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/

The deadline for responses to this document is **30 October 2010**

Following are the notes from 35 people representing 28 organisations who attended the discussion event. Please feel free to use these notes to help you answer the questionnaire. Many thanks to everyone for their contributions I hope we have summarized your thoughts and ideas accurately.

Question 1: What do we need to do to embed the true value of our natural resources in decision making at all levels?

The policy structure we have grew out of the WW2 question "What sort of country are we fighting for?" Values are fundamental, is there any reason to change the values, which have served us well for 70 years?

Education – local organisations such as Wildlife Trusts do have a key role but need resources to enable them to do this work

Better education in the environment at all levels (from 5 years upwards) so that eventually workers will link the natural environment to all aspects of life e.g. health, economic prosperity etc.

Question 2: Have we identified the right overarching challenges for the White Paper to consider?

a. If not, what should we focus on?

b. How should we approach these challenges?

There are a very wide variety of ecological issues to consider e.g. 'How important is it to consider the relationship between the natural environment, management of diseases of plants and animals – domestic human and wild?'

Question 3: What are the existing policies and practices aimed at protecting England's natural assets (including but not limited to those set out above on our biodiversity, seas, water bodies, air and soil) that currently work most effectively?

a. What works less well – what could we stop doing or do differently?

Good existing policies and practices

- Statutory protection i.e. SSSIs
- Standardisation of Local Wildlife Sites
- LBAP partnership in Oxfordshire works particularly well compared to other counties. This is due to having an independent nature forum in Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum that has promoted partnership working for the last 20 years.
- Biodiversity Opportunity Areas/ Conservation Target Areas have helped to give a strategic overview so all partners are clear in the county targets.
- In Oxfordshire a county approach to Minerals planning has resulted in good and appropriate habitat restoration projects and funding from the minerals operators to maintain the sites for 25 years.
- Agri-environment schemes – HLS is good because it is targeted. ELS has been useful in engaging with farmers and changing their mindsets towards conservation. Frustrations focus around tick box, over prescriptive, process driven approach – can we move to more outcomes focused approach? Issue of need for but cost of assessment.

Things that work less well or could be improved

Planning (also relevant to Q9)

- Planning standards could be higher. Planners try to make bad applications for development passable but there is not requirement for them to make passable applications good or excellent i.e. they need some legal support to make developers put in applications that conserve and enhance biodiversity.
- NERC act only requires “regard to biodiversity” rather than stronger wording need to change to require protection and enhancement of biodiversity rather than to just prevent damage (sufficient under NERC act to know what it is you are damaging).
- Offset and Banning arrangements – contentious for various reasons including potential loss of local replacement presumption leading to social inequity. There needs to be some type of ‘conservation’ credits that developers pay into at a county level and it can then be spent strategically on the county’s countryside.
- At the moment there is no incentive for developers to think at a landscape level.
- Statutory protection is good but we need extra protection beyond SSSIs e.g. Local Wildlife Sites (it needs to be remembered that SSSIs were only intended to be a representative sample of each habitat).
- At the moment 2 fields can be identical in terms of biodiversity/ species the one listed, as a SSSI will be protected from development the one next to it won’t be.
- There needs to be a strategy/ planning vehicle that gives a framework to planning in Oxfordshire. Planning is currently operating in a vacuum. At the moment the regional plans have been revoked, LDFs are struggling and Oxfordshire’s Structural plan ends in 2016.

Agriculture

- Agri-environment schemes are good because they've engaged with landowners at all levels and most landowners now understand the options.
- The agri-environment schemes now need to be measured and be more accountable. There is a need for some level of bureaucracy to measure outcomes.
- Agri-environment schemes could be improved, so that they are driven by outcomes on the ground.
- Agri-environment schemes could be improved and made more sophisticated to deliver better outcomes now that we have a good awareness regarding which options deliver the best outcomes for biodiversity. There could be an ELS+ level.

Question 4: What mechanisms should we focus on to ensure we manage our natural systems more effectively in future?

a. How should we define success?

b. How can we agree on common goals and assess our progress towards them?

- **Localism within a framework.** We need a national framework to provide a strategy. We can then fit county level strategy and delivery to the bigger picture. In the last 2 year's it has been useful to have national and regional habitat targets that our county targets can fit into. We have just revised our habitat targets for 2015 for Oxfordshire.
- There is a need for good and continuing data so we know what does and doesn't work. **Good quality data is** essential to many of these questions.

Question 6: What best practice and innovative approaches to protecting and enhancing our natural environment do you think should be considered as we develop the White Paper?

- In Oxfordshire we have the only independent Nature Conservation Forum (Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum www.oncf.org.uk) in the country. It has over 40 member organizations from local authorities, to wildlife charities to farming bodies and volunteer groups. Its remit is to encourage partnership working and to support member organizations. We think that this has helped Oxfordshire achieve much more than other counties with similar biodiversity budgets.
- Oxfordshire tested the first targeted approach to delivering biodiversity through the Conservation Target Area Approach this mapping approach has since been rolled-out across the south-east though re-named as (BOAs) Biodiversity Opportunity Areas. This integrated approach with the County Biodiversity Project Manager working closely with key partners e.g. FWAG, Natural England, Wildlife Sites Projects, and RSPB etc delivers appropriate habitats in appropriate locations.
- A clear one-stop document for planners 'Biodiversity and Planning in Oxfordshire' produced by Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre, Oxfordshire County Council and BBOWT (Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust). Also available on www.oxfordshire.gov.uk

Question 7: How best can we harness and build on public enthusiasm for the natural environment so people can help improve it through local action, as informed consumers or by shaping policy?

- This question assumes there is a high degree of interest in the general public, which is not there.
- There needs to be a **policy to ensure that all schools deliver environmental education** at all levels.
- **Environmental education** for teachers is important.
- We need to understand that there are different sorts of people who are interested in different areas of the environment and that some may want to take direct action and others to influence policy
- What enthusiasm there is needs to be supported with funding etc.
- It is important to have a **county framework** so that the many local volunteer groups can pull together and see how they fit into a bigger picture e.g. there are Carbon Reduction Groups, Transition Towns, CAG groups and conservation groups. For example planting woodland has multiple benefits – for biodiversity, for education (forest schools), local enjoyment and health benefits and a source of local fuel.
- There needs to be **funding for species identification** training. Most recording and monitoring is done by volunteers (1,400 in Oxfordshire) the recruitment and support of their work is vital to monitoring the success of projects.

Question 8: What should be our vision for the role of Civil Society in managing and enhancing the natural environment and for engaging individuals, businesses and communities in setting the agenda for that work?

Vision

- A vision must be LONG TERM, a vision of widespread community groups that are more connected to each other. The vision needs to embrace other areas such as health and other departments, recognizing the importance of the environment in all aspects of our lives and to embrace the farming community and acknowledge the pressures on them from the big supermarkets etc.
- The environment should not be bolt onto decisions it should underpin them. It should be core to all decisions and joined up with local agendas.

General public

- It is important to re-connect people with their environment. In the past a lot of money was spent on waste awareness, similar amounts should be spent on raising awareness of the Natural Environment.
- Better accessibility to university courses on the environment.

Local Groups

- The government needs to ensure there is support for local groups who manage and create habitats. There needs to be funded organizations that can support local groups with all sorts of advice re: funding, training, management etc.
- Local groups could play a role in helping to link local sites and improve connectivity
- Community Champions are important in creating and supporting local groups – there should be better opportunities/ funding for them to go on environmental courses.
- All parish councils should be encouraged to implement the NERC Act.

Question 9: How best can Government incentivise innovative and effective action on the natural environment, across England, at the local level?

a. How best can local government and other local partners work together to improve local outcomes on the natural environment, and pursue a more integrated approach linking a healthy natural environment to economic prosperity, sustainable development and a better quality of life, health and wellbeing?

- The government needs to provide direction from the top, to give priorities and finance.
- Local government and the Councillors need to set greater importance on the natural environment otherwise it will continue to be the least valued priority and ignored in favour of waste and litter. (Key Councillors were invited to our event to discuss this paper, of the 12 invited 2 replied to say they couldn't come, 1 came, 9 didn't reply)
- Enough flexibility for local authorities, Environment Agency and Natural England to work with the County BAP partnership and to support county BAP targets.

b. What are the most effective mechanisms for managing the natural environment where cross-boundary issues are involved, and making the link to other mechanisms for economic growth, transport and planning?

(See Q3 re need for national framework and higher planning standards.)

- Section 40 of the **NERC Act** (Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act) doesn't work, it needs to have **stronger wording**, and currently 'to have regard for biodiversity' doesn't result in any requirement to conserve or enhance biodiversity.
- In Oxfordshire Conservation Target Areas (CTAs) give a landscape scale approach to delivering biodiversity. This now needs to be promoted to local groups who in term need support to manage their sites within the CTAs more effectively.
- There needs to be innovative approaches e.g. County land banking/ conservation credits from developers that can be directed to projects that fit into Oxfordshire's CTA approach.

c. How best can the value of the natural environment be considered within local planning?

- There needs to be good green spaces in new urban areas and buildings need to be designed with wildlife in mind e.g. recently Cherwell District Council had included Swift bricks in their new sports centre in Banbury.
- Could Tree Preservation Orders be extended to cover other habitats

Question 10: How best could the economy reflect the true value of nature's services in the way business is done, to drive smarter, greener growth?

- **Build value of nature's services into core government services and delivery.**
- **Public sector should take a lead** in raising profile of what the natural environment offers and establishing monetary values.
- Key message for ecosystem services is that many things can be valued but what cannot be valued is the intrinsic value of the existence of the species themselves. It is important that when referring to ecosystem services that can be valued to provide the reminder about the intrinsic value that wildlife has.
- Need an **ecological bottom line** that businesses have to achieve including a biodiversity benchmark like for statutory bodies such as Thames Water. They could then be encouraged to do more than this. For example, one business has input funds into helping create a series of pond complexes near the River Thames. If other businesses could be encouraged to follow suit then it could help towards building up a network of habitats on a larger scale.
- **Key role of education in training the next generation going into business** to care for the natural environment. This requires an entitlement in the new National Curriculum for pupils to receive regular inputs of learning involving contact with nature, throughout their school career, followed up by input at university level. It also means environmental sustainability and biodiversity enhancement being a core part of

most degree courses so that graduates are aware of what businesses can do in these areas.

- **Paying for ecosystem services** – we need systems for paying up stream land managers to manage land for water, which in turn could provide better wildlife habitat.
- Need to **help small businesses understand** how anything they can contribute in helping biodiversity fits into the wider landscape. One way would be through food labelling such as apple juice labelled “pollinated by wild English bees”.

Question 11: Responsible businesses are already looking for ways to reduce their impact on the environment. How can we encourage more action like this?

- Promote businesses that are doing this. Important for conservation organisations to give credit where due for some very good biodiversity work being done by some businesses.
- Give awards for businesses that do reduce their impacts.
- Natural Environment bottom line for business ISO1401
- Huge opportunity for innovation. Environmental services could be a huge growth sector but needs more input in higher education system (and more funding).
- Environmental audits for companies

Question 12: What are the barriers to joining-up and seeking multiple benefits from our natural assets?

Question 13: What are the barriers to thinking big and taking a landscape scale approach to managing our natural assets?

- **Need for more consistent policy independent of politics** – with each change of government policies change. Need to get a White Paper above party politics, with all party support so will be consistent if government changes. Prior to last election AONBs had written a letter to all three main parties asking for commitment to landscape scale conservation. All three main parties responded positively so vital they work well together on this.
- **Lack of large area planning spatial strategies** - species move around in large scales but planning is at local scale. The Corallian ridge in Oxfordshire has potential for heathland habitat to offset potential loss of heathland through effects of climate change in more southern counties such as Hampshire. More heathland in Oxfordshire could act as a stepping stone to allow lowland Heathland to move north. But if planning is only done locally how do you persuade people in Oxfordshire of the need to increase Heathland habitat.
- **Lack of knowledge** in certain taxonomic groups – each species has a different requirement for how joined up an ecological network needs to be for it to

maintain a self-sustaining population. So the definition of joined up to a very mobile species like a bird is very different to that of an ancient woodland plant. There is not sufficient knowledge in some species. There is sufficient knowledge to inform and support landscape scale ecological restoration but at present some species may not benefit as much as others through lack of understanding of their needs.

- **Lack of funding** – There are 36 Conservation Target Areas in Oxfordshire which are landscape scale areas (equivalent to Biodiversity Opportunity areas used in many other counties) developed by the Oxfordshire Biodiversity Partnership and recognised by the voluntary conservation organisations, local community groups, local authorities and national agencies. These areas are the focus for maintenance, restoration and creation of BAP priority habitat in the county. ONCF's Biodiversity Project Manager co-ordinates the work across these CTAs. The most is achieved in terms of extending, linking and buffering of BAP habitats in areas where there is a dedicated on-the-ground project officer or where the Biodiversity Project Manager is able to focus but with 36 CTAs and limited funding there are many areas where there is not enough staff resource to carry out farmer and landowner liaison and working with other partners to achieve BAP habitat. The maintenance of existing funding for the Biodiversity Officer and other project officers is essential if the recommendations of the Lawton Review for more, bigger, better, joined habitat work is to be achieved at all. More funding would allow much better progress. This is a key area in nature conservation where funding can produce gains for biodiversity.
- **Need long term funding.** Too much funding is aimed at projects expected to be new and only last for three years. More funding is needed that can either accept requests for a similar project after 3 years (as much work needs doing on a more permanent basis rather than short-term) or longer term project funding needed. HLS accepts the need for longer term commitment through having 10 year agreements
- **Need ability to either provide more funding to private landowners** or have more ability to dictate what happens on private land Also many of the funding streams require public access and involvement of community or education work – it is important that all the above are included in some bids but much existing or potential wildlife habitat is on private land and the requirement for public access etc makes it very difficult to find funds to support staff to work on private land.
- **The Big Society needs funding** – there are many voluntary organisations able to deliver wildlife conservation work but they cannot do so without funding of them. There is concern that potential loss of funding will make them less able rather than more able to deliver what The Big Society ethos is pushing for.
- If local communities are unaware of how they fit into large scale landscape areas - **Support for local conservation groups is vital with a Community Officer such as ONCF employ in Oxfordshire.** This support should include

helping groups understand how the work on their patch fits into the bigger picture of landscape scale areas.

- Developing and supporting partnership work needs funding. **Few funders support process work** they need to see a value in this even if much of process work is intangible. Need for strong partnership - Oxfordshire co-operation between groups very good but in other areas not always as good and need joined up comprehensive system. And maintaining the current strong partnership in Oxfordshire will need funding, particularly for ONCF, and the future is in question with respect to funding.
- **Lack of public knowledge and appreciation of their natural environment** – wider knowledge of biodiversity and ecology needed amongst general public to help them fully understand why habitat management is taking place and why more land needed for restoration and creation of habitat.
- **There are many conflicting demands for land** e.g. food production v biodiversity v public amenity space
- **Multiple benefits are not necessarily compatible on all sites.** For example the best sites for wading birds will not have public access.

Question 15: If you could choose *just one* priority action for the Natural Environment White Paper to drive forward locally, nationally or internationally – what would it be?

- Implement the Lawton Review
- Nationally - Include effective accountability into policy
- Internationally – a proper level of funding for biodiversity conservation in the UK and overseas territories. These globally important places annually receive less than £5 million in total for conservation (this is pathetic). The UK has to lead by example on the global stage.
- Locally – fund organizations that support partnership working across the conservation sector e.g. ONCF.

The deadline for responses to this document is 30 October 2010. Please submit comments over the Defra website at www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/; or post them to: Natural Environment White Paper Team, Area 3D, Nobel House, 17 Smith Square, London SW1P 3JR.

Two questions were not considered as they were beyond our knowledge area and remit.

Question 5: How best can we reduce our footprint on the natural environment abroad, through the goods, services and products we use?

Question 14: What should be the priorities for the UK's role in EU and international action, to protect and enhance the natural environment at home and abroad?