

## **A brief look at the Government White Paper: *The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature* and what it might offer for biodiversity recording and use of biodiversity data.**

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### **Key points from the White Paper**

The White Paper is structured under four main themes:

1. The first theme of the White Paper is the Government's declared aim of focusing on 'local action', implying a reduction in statutory control of functions relating to biodiversity and the environment.
2. A second theme is the intention to integrate environmental processes and sustainability throughout other business and economic activity across the country.
3. Thirdly, the White Paper emphasises public engagement with the environment, and mechanisms to achieve this.
4. The fourth theme is the intention to enhance UK leadership on the environment in the World at large.

The principal issues and objectives, as the Government perceives them, which emerge from these themes are:

- Using as a base the results of the National Ecosystem Assessment, it focuses its actions through the prism of ecosystem services. The White Paper recognises the NEA assessment that 30% of our overall ecosystem functions show evident decline.
- Its response has been to focus on the idea of developing and enhancing coherent ecological networks, rather than the heretofore approach through piecemeal conservation effort. The result is intended to be a completely new Biodiversity Strategy for the UK.
- In order to set this in train, it is also proposing rather more radical approaches to the establishment of what it is calling Local Nature Partnerships, with cross-boundary interests relevant to Natural Areas, and wider remits than previous LBAP Partnerships.
- The idea of improving landscape scale ecology is taking shape through a proposal for large scale Nature Improvement Areas.
- In parallel, it is proposed to re-structure planning processes to enhance 'green' outcomes, using 'biodiversity offsetting' as a mechanism, but also focusing on enabling 'sustainable' economic development.
- Piloting of some of these proposals is at the heart of the current plan.
- In the process of putting these ideas into practice, the Government intends to make use of environmental cost/benefit studies, with a 'Natural Capital Committee' to advise. It proposes establishing the concept of 'payments' for ecosystem services to e.g. farmers, and to enhance the trade in sustainable products. There is planned to be a review of 'waste'; and guidance will be developed on the production of environmental impact reports and assessments.
- Public engagement is a key theme, and the Government mentions initiatives to enhance outdoor learning (without specifying how); the establishment and local ownership of 'Local Green Areas; the development of 'Green Infrastructure Partnerships' (without details as to resources); and encouraging 'volunteering'.

- Actions on the international front include promoting sustainability, pressing for the implementation of the Nagoya Convention on Biodiversity, provision of a further £25M fund to the Darwin Initiative; use of the Climate Change Fund to focus aid; encouraging ‘greening’ of the EU Common Agricultural Policy; and promoting the Nagoya protocol through the EU by developing a new EU-wide Biodiversity Strategy.
- Finally, as suite of key indicators in support of these proposals is planned to be developed by 2012.

### **Some key issues from the White Paper proposals**

1. A principal issue that is touched on by the White Paper, but not clearly discussed is the effect of moving away from a site/species-based focus on nature conservation to a broader-brush approach, and how this can be implemented without disruption to existing protections and management systems, legally and socially.
2. Climate change is highlighted in a number of areas, but it is not clearly explained how mitigations for the effects of this may affect our methods of assessing the environment, particularly in relation to site protection and monitoring.
3. The move to integrate the environment into economic and business activities will need ‘values’ to be put on species/habitats within ecological processes. It is not clear what guidance will be developed to assist with this, or what incentives there might be for people to carry out proper accounting.
4. Following on from this, there will be a need to enhance understanding of the use of detailed species attributes and ecological characteristics (e.g. through Landscape Character approaches) as tools in environmental assessment and in the choice of land management options, e.g. in ecological restoration work.
5. To get society at large to understand the approach, and to then take on the sort of work that will be needed, will require a considerable effort by Government (and others) to enable such a ‘sea-change’ of outlook to happen.
6. More immediate issues with the White Paper (some of which have already been recognised by Government) are the too-short timescales for response, e.g. for submitting proposals for Local Nature Partnerships by the end of July 2011!
7. Despite what the White Paper says, it remains rather unclear what ‘Localism’ implies in relation to how local people need to respond, what their powers might be (and how these might be exercised locally). In addition, the overall agenda of the White Paper implies a certain ‘top-down’ approach to putting the green agenda into action, whilst ‘local’ participation might imply a slower process. Will ‘consultation’ therefore get in the way of ‘action’?
8. The ambivalence of the Government on this kind of issue also shows in their plans to implement Nature Improvement Areas – a key plank in restoring ecological processes across large areas of landscape. These NIAs are only planned to be included in local plans if the local authorities choose to do so – therefore implying that they don’t need to.
9. Lack of clear thinking also shows with the idea that there will be a presumption in favour of development that is ‘economically sustainable’, as long as this is based on sustainable ecological processes. It is unclear how these will be defined, and how the promises to protect environmental capital will be squared with this change in emphasis.

## **Some potential opportunities arising from the White Paper for the biodiversity recording community**

1. There is a proposal to develop tools for habitat/ecosystem assessment by decision makers. This offers an opportunity for biodiversity data to be integrated into the processes. (Section 2.6).
2. The proposed U. K. Biodiversity Strategy will require input regarding a species-level understanding in relation to environmental assessments as well. (Section 2.7).
3. There is an opportunity to promote a genuinely ecologically-led landscape management approach in habitat and ecosystem restoration programmes. This will require a clear understanding of real ecological processes, alongside a structured programme of implementation. (Section 2.8)
4. The 'Local Nature Partnership' programme could be used to enhance biodiversity data-gathering processes and monitoring (Section 2.16). This includes cross-boundary partnership development. A fund of £1M is proposed.
5. There is a planned competition to develop the initial 12 (pilot) Nature Improvement Areas (with £7.5M in a pot over 5 years). (Section 2.28)
6. The White Paper requests offers to test 'biodiversity offsetting', which could offer an opportunity to ensure a strong system is put in place based on real data. (Section 2.41).
7. It is mentioned that the Government intends to increase funding for Higher Level Stewardship by 80% by 2014. This offers wide opportunities to put in place ecologically-based schemes on much larger scales, again based on real data. (Section 2.50).
8. There is mention of the intention to revitalise the Landscape Character approach to conservation, again offering the opportunity to ensure real biodiversity understanding is at the core of characterisations, and therefore underpinning landscape restoration. (Section 2.59)
9. There is also mention of the need to enhance the ecological contribution of road/railway verges, which could offer opportunities to make ecologically based assessments of capacity to enhance these important links in the environment. (Section 2.86).
10. There is specific mention of the intention to sustain the 'national biodiversity network' with £1.2M over three years; and also the establishment of a specific fund to support volunteer recording, including organisations that support this. This may be an important opportunity for the biological recording community, although details are unclear, and amounts not mentioned.