

Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Phase 2

Project overview

The Nature Improvement Area (NIA) Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Phase 2 project is a three year project (February 2013 – November 2015) which will build on the outcomes of the Phase 1 Scoping Study – Developing a framework for design, monitoring and evaluating NIAs. Collingwood Environmental Planning (CEP), with its partners GeoData Institute and Cascade Consulting, has been commissioned by Defra, in collaboration with Natural England, to undertake the NIA M&E Phase 2 project.

What happened in Phase 1?

During Phase 1 a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework was developed, including indicators and protocols under four themes to provide a useful tool for the NIAs to measure the progress of their delivery within and beyond the 3 year programme. Phase 1 also included the development of an online recording tool to aid the capture of monitoring information and data collected by the NIAs.

What is planned for Phase 2?

As of March 2013, the Phase 2 project has started to build on the work completed during Phase 1. During Phase 2 there will be:

- Further refinement of the online reporting system, particularly in response to the NIA's needs to help minimise the reporting burden on NIAs;
- Provision of additional support to the NIAs in their monitoring activities and their use of the online reporting system for example by responding directly to queries and problems and facilitating self-help such as through FAQs and sharing of queries and responses;
- Technical developments to support monitoring, for example through guidance in specific areas such as ecosystem services developed in collaboration with the NIAs and to reflect existing monitoring activities;
- Co-ordination and knowledge exchange with other related initiatives; and,
- An annual evaluation of the NIAs in 2013, 2014 and 2015, drawing on existing monitoring information and data recorded in the online tool. This evaluation will measure the individual and collective contribution of the NIAs to meeting policy (e.g. biodiversity) objectives).

“The Phase 2 project will undertake further technical development to support monitoring, provide support for NIA partnerships, enable co-ordination and knowledge exchange with other related initiatives and will undertake an evaluation of NIAs after 1, 2 and 3 years”. (Defra)

Aims and objectives of Phase 2

The overall aims of the Phase 2 project are to:

- gather evidence of approaches used within the NIAs and their outcomes, to maximise learning from the pilots and build a practical evidence base to inform future extension of the NIA approach; and
- assess the individual and aggregated contribution of the NIA pilots towards meeting the outcomes included in the Natural Environment White Paper and other agreed policy outcomes.

These overall aims are being delivered through a series of more detailed project aims and objectives under the following five work areas:

1. Supporting and developing the application of the monitoring and evaluation framework.
2. Developing evaluation methods.
3. Developing and supporting the consideration of social and economic impacts and contributions to wellbeing.
4. Undertaking analysis and evaluation of the NIAs.
5. Co-ordination with other research initiatives and activities.

More details on the approach

Over the period early 2013 – late 2015 the Phase 2 project will be working with and supporting the 12 initial NIA partnerships¹ in applying the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (developed in Phase 1), while also considering any additional *locally determined* NIAs as these emerge.

The project will refine the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework developed in Phase 1, in particular researching and developing monitoring of social and economic impacts and well-being outcomes associated with the NIAs, as well as habitat connectivity and ecosystem services. Refinements to the Framework will also respond to comments and feedback from the NIAs and where possible draw on indicators and approaches already being used or developed in NIAs.

The project will seek a dynamic working relationship with the NIAs, supporting and collaborating with the NIA partnerships to assist them in applying the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework and using the online reporting system, while also facilitating learning from this process and identifying refinements and improvements to the Framework and reporting system. Effective knowledge-exchange will help ensure that the Framework and online system are fit-for-purpose while being accessible to and meeting the needs of the NIA partners.

An annual evaluation of the outcomes of the 12 initial NIAs will also be completed in 2013, 2014 and 2015, as well as a cumulative evaluation of the impact of the NIAs after three years in terms of objectives and desired outcomes, cost-effectiveness and their impacts on biodiversity and the natural environment. For this evaluation strand of the work the project will use the reporting and monitoring generated by the NIA partnerships themselves, however other qualitative and quantitative data and information including in-depth case studies and information arising from other related research initiatives will also be utilised.

A key output of the annual and overall evaluation of the NIAs will be an understanding of the difference the NIAs have made towards achieving wider policy objectives, in particular the Natural Environment White Paper (NEWP), but also others, such as the Biodiversity 2020 strategy and international commitments to enhancing biodiversity and the natural environment.

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¹ More information on the NIAs is available from the Natural England website: <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/nia>