

NATURE IMPROVEMENT AREA GREATER THAMES MARSHES

1. Face up to change

This objective recognises the fact that “change” is a significant factor influencing the delivery of the ‘more, bigger, better and joined’ concept across the Greater Thames Marshes within the Thames Gateway. The challenging mix of environments; agricultural, industrial, residential and natural of which nature has been significantly undervalued has led to the development of this NIA to be a challenging and exciting project.

“Change” maybe new developments or infrastructure schemes in addition to the impact of climate change or the management of coastal defenses. To maximise the potential benefits of change we need to ensure we have a more coherent understanding of the present situation which will enable us to have better management resources in place for future changes of this magnificent yet challenging environment.

So, what have we done in the first year?

We have invested a significant amount of time and effort in capturing GIS data sets covering the Greater Thames Marshes area. We have used these data to produce an interactive pdf atlas which combines the existing biodiversity value, designations and land uses, in addition to showing the anticipated pressures for change such as: climate change vulnerability, strategic housing, land assessment, water resource issues (Catchment Abstraction Management Plans). Catchment Improvement Groups / Plans and SMP areas have also been represented.

Upon nearing the completion of this objective, it has demonstrated how this Greater Thames Marshes NIA Atlas will form a robust basis for mapping locations of necessary action and initiatives. The NIA has provided the platform to bring all this information together in one place – strengthening the evidence base which will help inform delivery over the next two years.

Using Defra’s biodiversity offsetting metric we have identified a site in Thurrock to deliver habitat compensation for invertebrates. The opportunity to use the NIA to test this scheme is important in an area like this where development competes with the need to provide net gains for biodiversity. This pilot project is using innovative mechanisms for delivery.

2. Delivery on the ground.

Stakeholders have highlighted they want to see 'more, bigger, better and joined' activities that focus on two specific biological units:

- 1) Rare assemblage of invertebrates associated with the terraces of the River Thames
- 2) Extensive grazing marshes supporting breeding Redshanks and Lapwing.

Thames Terrace Invertebrates:

Over the past year we have worked across a network of sites to:

- Deliver targeted action with a focus on three 'flagship' bumblebee species: Shrill Carder Bee, Brown-banded Carder Bee and Red-Shanked Carder Bee
- Work has been supported by individual landowners, Buglife, University of East London and Essex County Council
- All landowners of potential Thames Terrace sites have been contacted, survey access granted and outline proposals agreed
- Buglife has made successful bid for £35k to Cleanaway Trust to expand NIA objectives

Wetting the Marshes:

With a focus on improving the rate of breeding waders we are:

- Working to build a more robust ecological network of grazing marsh habitat across the NIA.
- The initial focus is on a strategic site at Higham Marshes that connects the existing habitats of RSPB's Shorne Marshes and Cliffe Pools Reserve to the East.
- Together with farmers and landowners we are thinking more about the use of predator fencing as a key means of increasing wader breeding productivity.

3. Partnership – Delivery on the ground.

The delivery of this NIA objective seeks to add value to existing schemes for biodiversity delivery across the Greater Thames Marshes. The developments of innovative tools to facilitate this additional delivery are being established alongside ongoing work by our stakeholders and business partnerships.

This year the NIA has:

- Engaged the Thames Gateway Local Nature Partnership and their desire to refresh the Thames Gateway Parklands vision.
- Looked to create opportunities to work alongside the planning of the areas Shoreline Management Plan and their proposals for managed realignment.

- Considered how to work in a positive planning mode to increase NIA focused delivery through major developments in the Gateway.
- Facilitated farmer-led actions for conservation through a NIA funded Farm Conservation Adviser. Farmers across North Kent attended our successful launch of a “Farm Focus Group” which raised key issues including the concept of wildlife friendly farming. This is supported by provision of advice on Environmental Stewardship agreements targeted for wader species such as Redshank and Lapwing.

4. Communication and Access

The Greater Thames Marsh area is distinctly unique incorporating nature and industry among a hugely diverse population. Our aim is to highlight this magnificent environment to local stakeholders and communities and give them a sense of pride. We will facilitate access to nature and place stakeholder understanding and participation at the core of our business, shaping the development and delivery of NIA projects.

To encourage a greater sense of community and assist in better communication of our project with communities and stakeholders we have developed our Greater Thames Marshes NIA web site (<http://greaterthamesmarshes.com/>). In addition to this we have delivered many Greater Thames Marshes NIA presentations at local and regional forums and successful promotional events. We have a diverse group of members who are part of our NIA Advisory Group. Their input and support are crucial in aiding the successful progress of this project. This year's engagement has laid the foundations and flagged up the priorities for the range of targeted events that we will hold next year.

5. Provide a long term legacy and the resources

Our aim is clear – to fulfill this commitment, keep the momentum flowing through ongoing funding bids, investment in community involvement, stewardship and fostering long term stakeholder engagement, we want to secure an additional £7m to ensure that all the necessary NIA development work can continue and grow after 2014/15.

In order to do this we have been quick off the mark to allow for maximum time to work up and submit bids within the initial 3 years of funding.

We have:

- Met with local, national and international funders to talk about all new funding opportunities and timeframes for applications and to table our ideas
- Developed five significant and exciting thematic projects and are now starting to develop these into fundable packages in conjunction with partners
- Attended EU funding fairs in the Netherlands to promote the NIA projects and are seeking European partners to help us develop innovative and transnational project ideas

The Greater Thames Marshes NIA Advisory Group will play a key role in developing the initial ideas of these potential projects in addition to helping secure match. These potential project concepts emerged as a result of an 'Ideas Workshop' attended by NIA Advisory Group members.