

Board Paper

8th October 2015

Paper Title	LIFE Natura 2000 Programme Strategic programme for the management and restoration of Natura 2000 in Wales - Prioritised Action Framework
Paper Reference:	NRW B B 58.15
Paper Prepared By:	Kath Hewitt, LIFE Natura 2000 Programme Manager Christine Edwards Protected Sites Team Leader KSP. Ruth Jenkins

Purpose of Paper:	Information
Recommendation:	The board is asked to: a) Note the progress made by staff to provide a strategic Programme for Natura 2000 sites in Wales providing documentation and update of priority action at a site and thematic scale b) Note the provision of the Priority Action Framework for WG providing a priority strategy for EU and other funding programmes. c) Recognise that NRW is now developing a future operational Programme based on this strategic body of work and other strategic and planning work required to deliver cross cutting and thematic actions
Decision Required:	N/a

Impact:	Impact on the Environment: The Natura 2000 network aims to have appropriate conservation measures in place to maintain or restore the designated habitats and species to favourable condition, contributing to Favourable Conservation Status.
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	Impact on the Economy: Natura 2000 Habitats and species contribute to the economic well being of Wales by providing a range of ecosystem services, such as carbon sequestration, erosion and flood defence, amelioration of pollution, tourism and recreation. Investment in management and restoration stimulates local businesses and growth of green jobs. Development of externally funded projects brings investment and job growth into the local economy. Impact on Knowledge: The LIFE N2K Programme has developed and expanded comprehensive evidence base of actions, priorities and costs which is available to staff and stakeholders via the NRW ISIS Actions Database and associated reports.
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Executive summary

The LIFE Natura 2000 Programme, a three-year, £1 million project funded by the EU LIFE scheme, has recently completed a major piece of work to identify actions which are required to bring the protected habitats and species of the Welsh Natura 2000 network into favourable condition as required by the Habitats Directive.

Natura 2000 is comprised of 92 Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and 20 Special Protection Areas (SPAs) which together cover 7% of Welsh land area and 36% of territorial waters.

3,600 site-based action have been identified, with an associated cost of £120 million to 2020. Strategic and cross-cutting actions have also been established.

Priorities have been set, a both site level and national level, to help target scarce resources where the need is greatest.

The work has sought to engage internal and external partners at every stage, including Welsh Government. 38 workshops or other events have been hosted attended by over 500 people, and team members have contributed to over 100 other meetings.

Now we know the scale and scope of the required work, the challenge is to deliver improvements on the ground by embedding actions within operational plans (of NRW and others) where resources are available, and integrate with the natural resource management approach, particularly the Nature Recovery Plan and Area Statements.

Where funding gaps exist, the challenge is to actively source new finance, for example, from EU funds, innovative mechanisms, or by maximising mutual benefits from existing resources within other sectors such as flood defence, forestry, tourism and health.

Issue

1. Wales supports a wonderfully rich and varied wildlife. The prime examples of habitats and species threatened in Europe are protected by 92 Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and 20 Special Protection Areas (SPAs), designated under the Habitats and Birds Directives. These are collectively known as Natura 2000 – part of a European-wide network of nearly 28,000 sites. In Wales Natura 2000 covers a total of 757,000 ha

- 36% of territorial waters and 7% of land area. 26,901 ha of which is on land managed by NRW.

2. Natura 2000 sites are adversely affected by a range of pressures and threats, and require investment in active management and restoration if their protected habitat and species features are to remain in or reach favourable condition.
3. The need to connect designated sites in the wider countryside is recognised in both the Habitats Directive and Birds Directive Article 10 and 3, to support wider ecological resilience. The policy direction in Wales to manage natural resources in an integrated way and to build resilient natural systems is not separate to or instead of the favourable conservation status of Natura 2000 sites, but does require more active recognition to optimise and value these areas for wider benefit.

Summary

4. This paper presents the Summary Report (see Annex 1) of the LIFE Natura 2000 Programme for Wales, a £1 million project running from 2012 to September 2015. The project was led by Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and supported by the EU LIFE fund.
5. The LIFE Natura 2000 Programme has set out the actions required to enable Wales to make significant progress towards bringing Natura 2000 species and habitats into favourable condition and help meet its commitments under the European Habitats and Birds Directives. The Programme also aims to provide an agreed formal platform to seek funding for Natura 2000 related projects from all potential sources, and to integrate Natura 2000 funding into other financial instruments and policy areas including improving the understanding of the value and services from these sites and how their management supports the principles of sustainable natural resource management.

Background

6. The Prioritised Action Framework (PAF) for Wales is a planning document developed on behalf of the Welsh Government, which sets out the objectives and priorities of EU member states for the management and restoration of their Natura 2000 sites. In particular, it helps identify EU co-financing requirements, for example by identifying the potential role of each EU fund for the next Financial Perspective. The EU acknowledges the need to financially support member states in their work to manage and restore Natura 2000.
7. The first PAF for the UK was submitted to Europe in 2013. NRW was commissioned by the Welsh Government to draft an updated Welsh section of the PAF. The outcomes from the NRW LIFE N2K Programme will form the basis of the revised version, which is due in October 2015.

Programme actions

8. To address the issues and risks adversely affecting Natura 2000 habitats and species and work towards appropriate management and restoration, the LIFE Natura 2000 Programme has developed a strategic prioritised programme of actions, for the period to 2020. It consists of the following four elements:-

- Prioritised Improvement Plans (PIP) - site action plans for all 112 Natura 2000 sites, derived from the NRW Actions Database. Priorities and total costs for each site are identified – with a total of £120 million for the entire network.
 - 11 Thematic Action Plans – to address major issues and risks at a national level
 - 5 Cross-cutting Action Plans - e.g. Communication and education, Financing, Integration, Investigations, and Policy and Legislation
 - Prioritised Action Framework
9. An example of a site is Fenn's, Whixall, Bettisfield, Wem and Cadney Mosses SAC where proposed actions include the purchase of land, the creation of management agreements with landowners, direct management on the National Nature Reserve and the preparation of a Site Nitrogen Action Plan. Work includes tree and scrub removal, blocking drains to retain water on-site, removal of solid waste, and improving ditch management. This site is the subject of an EU LIFE bid, led by Natural England.
10. All actions are those which are required to address issues/risks which are barriers to reaching favourable condition. Delivery is subject to resource availability and landowner consent. They do not represent a committed, funded operational programme of delivery.
11. An example of estimated cost requirements versus existing budget is as follows: £8.6 million has been identified for new and renewed NRW Management Agreements by 2020. Actual expenditure on Management Agreements during FY 2014-15 was £2.01 million (although this includes spend on management agreements already in place).
12. PIP Actions have been subject to a process of engagement with internal specialists and those external partner organisation leading on actions, such as Dwr Cymru or RSPB. Thematic Actions have been available for consultation through a series of workshops (including for Welsh Government sector leads) and individual comment.

Consensus on priorities

13. In line with PAF requirements and operational needs, the LIFE Natura 2000 Programme has sought to identify priorities for Natura 2000 to enable limited resources to be focused where the need is greatest. This has been achieved by developing a tool-based approach which can be used at different scales and by different users/sectors. The tools have been used to establish key ecosystem priorities.
14. The identified priorities have been subject to strategic thinking and collaboration between a range of partners through workshops and consultation. This has included involvement by NRW specialists and external partners, as well as Welsh Government (not only of the nature conservation branch but representatives of other sectors such as fisheries, agriculture, climate change etc.)
15. The approach for further priority setting against the role of these sites for the delivery of wider ecosystem resilience and societal benefits is only recently emerging. More work is required to develop the information and evidence to support the possible multiple benefits against a wider set of objectives from these sites.

16. The Inventory of Ecosystem Services identifies key benefits for people provided by Natura 2000 habitats, species and sites in Wales, which helps to promote the consideration of the natural environment as an integral part of the Welsh economy – in line with natural resource management principles.
17. The financial evaluation of these benefits was not within the remit of the project and would require some initial scoping as well as a significant investment of resources to deliver. A short feasibility study has been commissioned by the LIFE Natura 2000 Programme which lays out an approach to addressing this work.

Next steps

18. The better management and use of designated sites is highlighted as a 'priority area for action' in the interim Natural Resources Policy Statement produced by the Welsh Government. These sites will have a critical role in increasing resilient and diverse ecosystems that deliver economic, social and environmental benefits within and beyond specific sites. The LIFE Natura 2000 Programme will form part of the body of evidence to support an area approach to the integrated management of natural resources, and can inform Area Statements. Further work will be required to indicate wider priorities where these sites have a role in solving interlinked ecological problems both on and beyond the site.
19. An AfterLIFE plan is being produced and describes how the actions identified in the LIFE Natura Programme can be delivered by relevant organisations including NRW, Welsh Government, third sector bodies etc. This plan also addresses issues of future governance in line with the developing Nature Recovery Plan for Wales.
20. Actions under the remit of NRW will need to be delivered through the development of operational plans. Corporately this is an opportunity to reassess priorities in future corporate, business and directorate delivery plans. The biodiversity teams are currently leading on a project to develop our corporate response to delivery through an across-Directorate group. This group has initially been set up to structure a set of integrated priorities for the preparation of a deliverable plan of actions for Natura 2000 surface and ground waters as part of the Second Cycle River Basin Management Programme of Measures (as required by the Water Framework Directive). This work needs to continue together with the operational teams to agree how we will operationalise the programme of activity for wider Natura sites in a way that also looks to support the delivery of a wider set of management objectives.
21. NRW will need to set out a funding strategy for this programme of work, identifying existing budgets and new opportunities for funding work directly and in partnership with others or where this work can be built into others' funding priorities. The PAF should support the focus of funding allocations by a range of funding bodies including EU.
22. The Thematic and Cross-cutting Action Plans identify a range of strategic and policy work required to support programme delivery. NRW is working to feed these into the Nature Recovery Plan. Many of the issues outlined within these plans highlight a mix of technical and adaptive challenges. Matters impacting on the features of these sites give a strong indication of the need to move away from purely scientific management of solutions often with enforced co-operation to a more collaborative adaptive approach, where people closest to the problem and with the opportunity to contribute to the solutions are engaged. This will be essential to ensuring that Natura 2000 is supportive of the natural resources management approach. For example priorities highlighted to

improve upland SAC sites should look for and demonstrate action to highlight and deliver a range of multiple benefits such as water management and carbon storage as well as the biodiversity gains. Engaging a wide range of stakeholders with diverse perspectives in examining the issues and opportunities for delivery is more likely to deliver a sustainable and supported delivery.

23. NRW can influence other organisations to deliver the Programme through, for example, partnership agreements and competitive funds, such as the 2015/6 £1.12 million fund which is focused on delivering Natura 2000 actions. NRW may also provide support for priority external funding bids made by partners. The Environment Bill also places an enhanced biodiversity and resilience of ecosystems duty on public authorities. However, many organisations already share NRW's objective to bring Natura 2000 into favourable condition, and their primary need is clear and ongoing communication about the key actions and priorities so they can align their own work plans with them.
24. Monitoring of progress delivering actions is done via the Actions Database. Monitoring of environmental outcome, that is the, condition of the Natura 2000 habitat and species features is done by the NRW SAC/SPA monitoring programme; the results of which feed into the relevant Dashboard Target.

Risks

25. The primary risk is the failure to develop and deliver an implementation plan for NRW and others in support of the emerging priority of better management and use of designated sites.
- Implementation may fail due to issues such as the lack of a strong coordinating role within NRW, failure to incorporate actions into operational plans of NRW and difficulty finding adequate resources or match funding for external funding bids.
 - NRW needs to provide leadership and support to other partners, including landowners to enable their role in delivery of identified actions.
 - NRW needs to influence third party funding streams.
 - This programme needs to feed through into the Nature Recovery Plan and demonstrate how these sites support wider ecological resilience.
26. Failure to implement European Directives can potentially lead to infraction proceedings. NRW has committed within our Corporate and Business Plans to advise and support Welsh Government to implement the relevant Directives, particularly the Birds, Habitats and Water Framework Directive.
27. Failure to provide clarity of the wider role of Natura 2000 sites within the delivery of Sustainable Natural Resource Management and the goal of developing wider social, economic and ecological resilience.

Financial implications

28. The Programme identifies some significant costs to complete delivery of favourable status of sites in Wales. The PAF can potentially unlock future funding from the EC, both dedicated funds such as LIFE and other funds such as structural funds and Rural Development Programmes, but only if Operational Programmes are drawn up in such a way that funds can be utilised for actions on Natura 2000 sites. For example,

Convergence funding has offered no such opportunities in Wales although in other member states, considerable Convergence funding is available for work on Natura sites.

Furthermore, other opportunities have been identified which have the potential to realise improved funding for Natura 2000 in the future if they are subject to appropriate development. These include:

- Innovative/novel funding mechanisms, such as Payment for Ecosystem Services, biodiversity offsetting, visitor payback schemes or specialised product marketing.
- Integration with funding from other sectors – adaptation of existing public spend to realise greater mutual benefits, including flood defence, forestry, tourism, climate change, health etc.
- Refinement of existing funds such as Glastir and RDP.

The Financing and Integration Cross-cutting Actions Plans provide further details. The Natura 2000 Funding in Wales and the New Solutions for Natura 2000 in Wales reports provide further information.

Communications

29. Communication, awareness raising and education have been identified as key cross-cutting issues for the Natura 2000 network and a plan of action has been produced which identifies key requirements for the period to 2020.

30. Materials produced by the LIFE N2K Programme are in line with its Stakeholder Engagement Plan and NRW branding guidelines on style and format. Regular newsletters have been produced and all reports shared via the NRW [website](#).

31. Recent and upcoming communication to highlight the final results of the project include:

- A set of 11 YouTube videos (English and Welsh versions) aimed at the general public will be available online. The videos highlighting ‘Natura 2000 – the Natural Wealth of Wales’, focus on different ecosystems such as woodland and estuaries.
- A media release.
- A presentation at the recent Welsh Biodiversity Partnership Conference.
- Four articles.

32. This work needs to be integrated into the communication work being developed for the NRM Transformation Programme. A specific project has been set up to do this

Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA)

EqIA not required.

Index of Annexes

Annex 1: LIFE Natura 2000 Programme for Wales Summary Report