

Securing the Value of Nature

The first year of the Natural Environment White Paper: is the ambition being delivered?

13 July 2012

Introduction

The Natural Environment White Paper (*The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature*) was published on 7 June 2011. It was warmly welcomed by Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link)¹ as an inspiring and refreshing step-change in thinking about protection of the natural environment within the Coalition Government. The breadth and depth of consultation resulted in a strong, robust document attracting wide support from across Government departments, agencies and wider society.

One year has now passed since *The Natural Choice* was published and this first ‘anniversary’ provides an opportunity to reflect on progress made with its commitments and wider ambitions. What positive steps have been taken and what more could be done to ensure its effective implementation over the longer term? Are there reports on the ground that indicate whether the White Paper will live up to the expectations and excitement it has created?

Positive Milestones

In our view, significant ‘milestones’ have been achieved since *The Natural Choice* was published:

- Its clear, unambiguous articulation of Government policy on the environment clearly influenced the content of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and demonstrated the value of a strong White Paper.
- Twelve Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) have been selected and around 50 Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) should soon be announced. Both have received funding within a year of the White Paper’s publication, or will do so very shortly. This is a significant achievement. NIAs have strong political and departmental support, are recognised within the NPPF, and generated much interest across England from communities, landowners, farmers and conservation Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs). The setting up of NIAs and LNPs showed the potential of the White Paper to inspire people to take action on the ground, and the progress which can be made when government commitment, administrative support and funding are targeted and made to work effectively.

¹ Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together 37 voluntary organisations concerned with the conservation and protection of wildlife, countryside and the marine environment. Our members practice and advocate environmentally sensitive land management and encourage respect for and enjoyment of natural landscape and features, the historic and marine environment and biodiversity (www.wcl.org.uk).

It is still early days for the NIAs and LNPs and it will be important for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to identify how the wider concept of NIAs (as contained in the NPPF) – and excluding the initial 12 ‘trail blazers’ that succeeded in the competition – will be rolled out more widely. We also wait to see how the model of best practice will deliver significantly for the species and habitat outcomes of the *Biodiversity 2020* strategy and the UK’s commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity.

We would like to see a clear strategy for the above and a focus on how any emerging NIAs can be funded and provided with the support required to make them effective.

The effectiveness of the final LNPs is dependent upon the development of strong functional links to Local Enterprise Partnerships. In addition, for LNPs to succeed, Defra needs to enable liaison with other government departments and the forthcoming Health and Wellbeing Boards. Link warmly welcomes Defra’s support for the establishment of LNPs to date and its continuing support for this White Paper commitment.

Progress has also been made in other areas, as outlined in Defra’s regular reports on delivery of *The Natural Choice*. However, one year on, we are also aware of challenges emerging which, unless overcome, may undermine the translation of the ambition within the White Paper into real change on the ground.

Areas of Concern

There are three key areas of concern, which are emerging risks to the effective delivery of *The Natural Choice*.

i) The need for greater cross-Government commitment to delivery of *The Natural Choice*

The White Paper provides Defra with a strong, clear message to the whole of Government about the importance of our natural environment and what is needed to secure it for the future. Yet this message has not been fully integrated within other departments, their initiatives or resource allocation, and in some cases it has been positively undermined. For example, there has been a succession of Treasury statements that have characterised environmental protection as a barrier to growth or a burden on business.

The shared Government ambition set out in the White Paper will not be realised if there is a fragmented approach to delivery. Though *Biodiversity 2020* (the new England Biodiversity Strategy) was welcome and takes forward some elements of the White Paper, it is insufficient on its own and lacks the required cross-departmental support to deliver the White Paper in full. Wider mobilisation of support for its initiatives across society will also require much greater consistency of language and the inclusion of the White Paper’s aspirations into wider Government policy and communications.

We therefore recommend that a cross-Government strategy for implementation of *The Natural Choice* is developed and communicated.

ii) Insufficient urgency in identifying funding mechanisms for initiatives in *The Natural Choice*

Creative approaches to funding for the natural environment were promoted within *The Natural Choice* and supported by Link.

We acknowledge the progress made in this area with the establishment of the Ecosystem Markets Task Force, the Natural Capital Committee and the plans to produce best practice guidance and an action plan for the “Payment for Ecosystem Services” approach later this year. It is important that these and other new and innovative approaches to funding for initiatives continue to be developed and implemented – not only to ensure that commitments within the White Paper will be met, but to demonstrate that the ‘paradigm shift’ around funding for the protection of nature can become a reality. Defra must monitor the effectiveness of market-led/ private sector-driven funding mechanisms and initiatives to ensure that they deliver the funding required, and intervene swiftly if they do not.

iii) The importance of clarity of purpose and dedicated support for initiatives

The progress made to date in the delivery of initiatives such as the NIAs has been due to their clarity of purpose, dedicated administrative support within Defra and the availability of initial funding. These three elements are vital to the success of **all** initiatives in the White Paper but we are concerned that several initiatives lack one or more of these. We would therefore urge Defra to strive for success through ensuring that all initiatives have the focus and support required to be effective.

Conclusions

We congratulate Defra on its achievements since *The Natural Choice* was published. We acknowledge that fulfilment of its ambitions is a long-term goal and that, after one year, it is not realistic to try to make a full evaluation of its impacts. However, there are early signs of areas in which more focus and commitment from the Government will make a significant difference in delivering this ground-breaking piece of policy whilst ensuring that scarce resources are used effectively. We offer our continued support to Defra and other government departments in their efforts in this regard.

This paper is supported by the following 12 Link members:

- British Ecological Society
- Campaign for National Parks
- Campaign to Protect Rural England
- Friends of the Earth England
- The Grasslands Trust
- The National Trust
- Open Spaces Society
- Plantlife
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust
- Woodland Trust

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