

North York Moors National Park Authority Scrutiny Meeting

29 July 2019

The Authority's work on Wildlife and Wildlife Connections

1.	Purpose of the Report
1.1	To report back to Members on the findings of a review of the Authority's Wildlife Work.

2. Introduction

2.1 Each year, in line with the Authority's performance framework, officers have committed to completing 'Performance and Learning reviews'. This is one element of a comprehensive performance monitoring framework, which includes biannual updates for Members on a set of Business Plan headline indicators, an annual review of overall progress towards objectives in the Business Plan and regular updates on the delivery of the National Park Management Plan.

2.2 At the Authority meeting in December 2018 members agreed to focus on the Authority's Wildlife work for the 2019 review. Officers set out following the rationale for this review

"The Authority's Business Plan contains a number of objectives and targets related to improving wildlife and identifies work on wildlife corridors as a strategic priority. In recent months National Parks have been 'under the spotlight' in relation to their contributions towards wildlife conservation, and the future is uncertain about support for farmers and land managers for conservation / stewardship schemes. At the same time, the broader pressing issue of the impacts of climate change on wildlife and habitats is already taking effect and this would be a useful time to take stock and consider the NPA's achievements to date and its future response to the issues."

2.3 The aims of Performance and Learning reviews are to provide Members with a detailed insight into a specific work programme, to understand the Authority's achievements and challenges related to delivery and to look at the issues for programme delivery in the future. Findings are discussed and presented at the annual Scrutiny meeting in July. Back in December it was envisaged that the UK would have left the EU by the time this review was completed and there may have been a clearer indication of what future agricultural and environmental support would look like with the UK as a non EU member and the implications this would have on land management in the National Park.

3. For Consideration

3.1 The attached report reviews the Authority's work on Wildlife and specifically Wildlife Connections undertaken since 2012. This work programme is just one intervention being delivered by a range of organisations and individuals to conserve and protect wildlife in the National Park to deliver the objectives of the National Park Management Plan. The national agri-environment schemes are the largest of these interventions. The Authority has worked to complement these schemes with its own initiatives, which have in the past included a North York Moors NPA bespoke farm conservation scheme as well as projects and partnerships focused on specific

geographical areas, habitats and species (for example current work on the Rye and Esk catchments and the Heritage Lottery Funded Turtle Dove Project).

3.2 The effectiveness of Authority interventions to establish wildlife corridors by strengthening key connections in the National Park are the main focus of this review. 71% of the Business Plan target of achieving 132 connections has been met. This result is set against a backdrop of the Authority delivering wildlife conservation initiatives on an unprecedented scale across the National Park. Funding has been secured to work on The Land of Iron partnership as well as Ryevitalise, work on the River Esk and smaller projects such as the Turtle Dove and Landscape Enhancement Initiative projects. All of these are contributing to providing significant habitat improvements.

3.3 The review is set in the context of a broad set of national Agricultural and Environmental policy issues, changing trends in the global status of wildlife and a current national review of protected landscapes (The Glover review). Against this complex backdrop, the Authority has to consider how it can best contribute to and prioritise its wildlife conservation efforts in the future, based on experience to date.

4. **Conclusion**

4.1 Members are asked to review the contents of the attached report.

5. **Financial and Staffing Implications**

5.1 In the short term (to 2020 i.e. this Business Plan period) finance and staffing resource levels for Wildlife Connections work have been agreed. In the longer term, as the Authority's strategic direction (steered by the development of a new National Park Management Plan) is set, longer term implications for resourcing wildlife conservation work will be negotiated.

6. **Contribution to the National Park Management Plan**

6.1 The Authority's Wildlife Connections directly contributes to the aims of the National Park Management Plan and specifically objectives E7, E10, E11, E13, E14 and E15.

7. **Legal Implications**

7.1 None arising directly from this report.

8. **Recommendation**

8.1 That Members review and comment on the attached report

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A Review of the Authority's work on Wildlife and Wildlife Connections

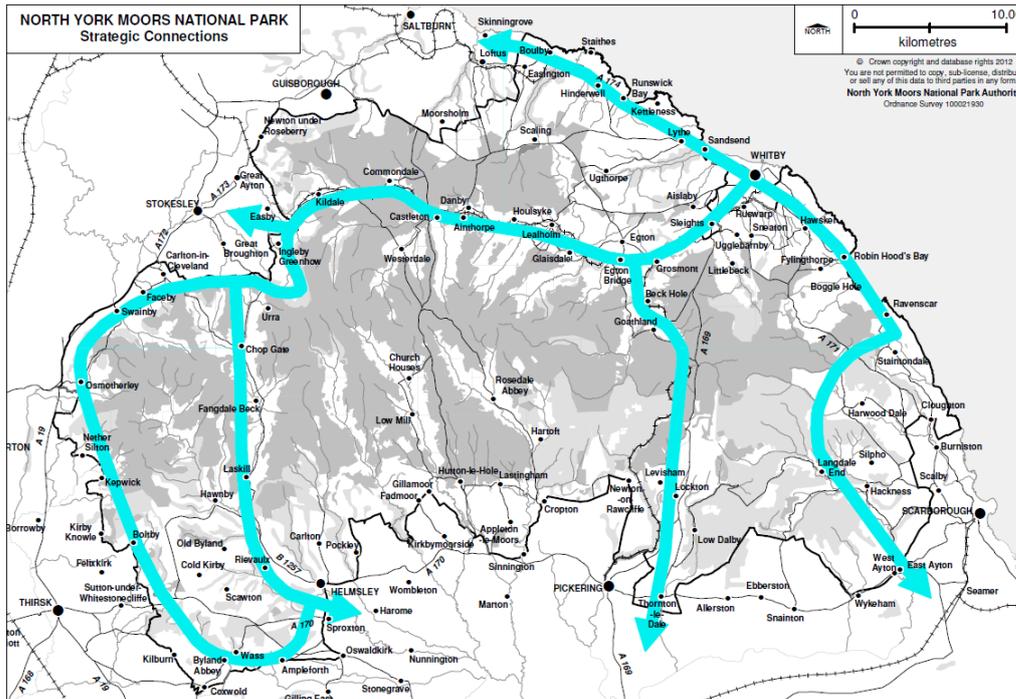
Purpose of the Review

1. To review the effectiveness of work undertaken to establish wildlife corridors in the National Park by improving 132 key wildlife connections; areas identified as critical for delivering a coherent and resilient network of habitats following Lawton Principles¹.
2. To assess whether the activities undertaken under this programme have achieved the objectives set in the Authority's Business Plan.
3. To consider how current resources, policy and the changing environment will influence our priorities for the immediate and longer term future in this area, and how we might respond to these influences.

Relevance of the Review

4. The first purpose of National Parks is to '*conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage*'. This is the cornerstone of our work. In 2012, broad areas with the greatest density of semi-natural habitats, the most valuable habitats and the best existing habitat networks were identified to enhance and improve (in line with the Lawton review of 2009). Since then this has been a key focus of the work of the Conservation Team. An average annual budget of c£160,000 has been allocated to Wildlife Connections, Conservation and Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) agreements with a total of around £870,000 of core budget spent on this work since 2013. Additional expenditure through project work such as River Esk and Land of Iron increases this to c£1.9 million.
5. The North York Moors National Park Management Plan commits to '*continue to support a diverse range of priority species and habitats with increased extent, connection and resilience*'. This was subsequently interpreted and stated as a strategic priority to 'complete improvements in 132 key wildlife connections by 2019', in the Authority's own Business Plan for 2017-2020. Improving connectivity involves creating linear links and conserving/expanding habitats to make the areas inter-reliant and more robust. It requires consideration of the purpose of the connection and what is most appropriate in an individual location for the species and habitats concerned. These priority areas were located within a number of 'strategic connections' across the park and are shown below.

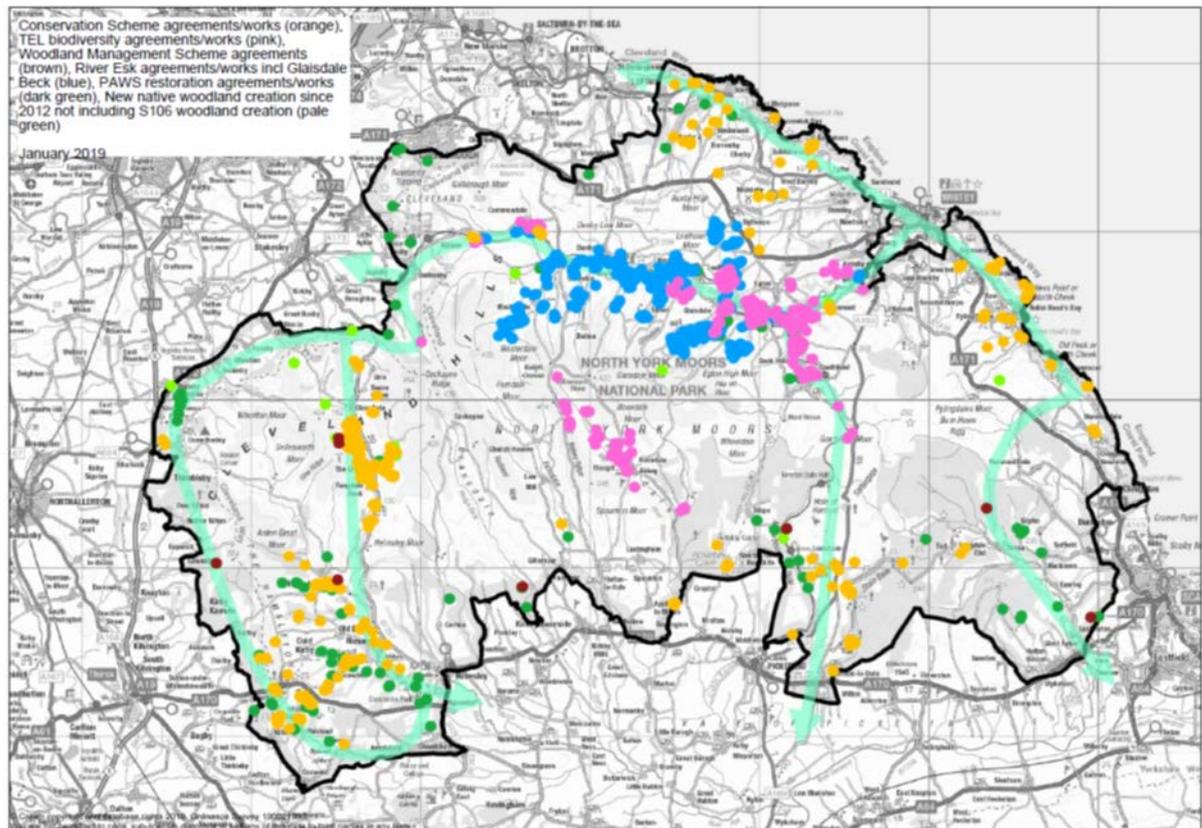
¹ John Lawton (2009), Making Space for Nature – "Better management of existing sites > Bigger sites > More sites > Enhance connectivity > Create new corridors"



- Work had already been taking place in the National Park to restore PAWS, improve riparian habitats and to conserve and enhance species rich grasslands, which are some of the Park’s most important habitats. These areas together with the Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI’s) form the basis of a network; however some were isolated or lacked scale to function as effective ecosystems. Addressing gaps in connectivity between habitats in the National Park was identified as a high priority in the Business Plan, in line with the ambition set out in the National Park Management Plan. A target for connections was set based on mapping undertaken which identified existing gaps and areas of potential improvement. As the deadline for reaching the target has now passed, it is appropriate to take stock and look back on our achievements and challenges.

Delivery

- Connections work has been delivered by Authority staff by offering land management advice, engaging and delivering activities with Volunteers and Apprentices and setting up environmental agreements with land managers. Land management agreements and grants for capital works have been an integral part of all of our conservation core work and projects and offered under the Conservation Scheme, Woodland Management Scheme, the Land of Iron Landscape Partnership and the Esk Salmon and Pearl Mussel Recovery Project. Around 265 capital work grants and longer term agreements have been delivered since 2012. The distribution of these is shown on the map below. 39 of the longer term management agreements are still in place.



Map showing distribution of a range of environmental agreements set up to deliver habitat connectivity objectives.

Performance Against Targets

8. In total, against a target of 132 connections, 95 were made, a 71% success rate. Delivery of “key ecological connections” across the 132 potential Wildlife Connections identified since 2012 include:

- 30 areas (22%) - work completed to achieve key ecological connection
- 9 areas (7%) – key ecological connection already in place
- 56 areas (42%) – Significant improvement work started

a total of 71%, and in addition:

- 10 areas (8%) – work completed but key ecological connection not made
- 27 areas (20%) – not started

Case Studies: Examples of work on the ground – agreements and volunteer tasks

Species-rich grassland

9. Land Management Agreements, which included species rich grassland, range from maintenance of existing sites, restoration of degraded sites and creation of new species rich grassland. The example below is from Southside Farm where improved grassland was re-seeded with green hay to create a new species rich hay meadow.



10. A number of restoration projects used volunteer tasks to control scrub on species-rich grassland sites. In the photos below Conservation Volunteers spent two days controlling scrub on a remnant area of species-rich calcareous grassland. Blackthorn, ash and bramble were beginning to encroach on this important grassland habitat; the site is botanically rich and, if left, the scrub would begin to have a negative impact on the species found on the site. A Linking Landscapes Grassland Volunteer will visit the site in the summer to undertake a full botanical survey to assess the impact of the scrub control and the volunteers will return over the next few years to continue this crucial work.



Tree Planting

11. 31 oak trees were planted at Griff Farm (just off the A170 before Rievaulx), grant aided through the Connectivity Project with the aim of re-establishing a network of hedgerow oak trees across the landscape to provide connectivity 'stepping stones' between woodland and farmland habitats.



Hedge Planting

12. Hedge planting and restoration (coppicing, gapping up etc) were a major focus of connectivity work in some areas. The photo below shows a hedge-planting project near Hawaby, in an area that had been identified as important for a mosaic of different habitats. The new hedgerow will help link an area of woodland, a SSSI designated for its unimproved neutral grassland and an area of wood pasture we helped create two years ago. For all new hedgerow planting we specify a range of different species to be planted, including hedgerow trees, particularly oak, and specify that once the hedges are established enough to be cut that they are cut no more than once every 2 years to allow them to flower and produce fruit.



The photo below shows part of a large-scale hedge planting project at Kettleness that reinstated the original hedgerow network over a large area.



April 2017



June 2019

What Worked Well

13. The Authority has been a pioneer in the application of theoretical research on wildlife connectivity at a landscape scale. Our learning can be used to refine and improve future programmes. There has been excellent engagement with land managers alongside an improved take up of other conservation grant schemes such as Traditional Boundary Scheme and Historic Buildings Grant. At the same time increased levels of connectivity have been achieved whilst building a critical mass in key areas to deliver landscape scale work. This also resulted in enhanced identification, knowledge and understanding of key habitats and species within the National Park and a more robust baseline of data for the Conservation Team in these priority areas.
14. Over 2,000 Volunteer days have been recorded in the delivery of connectivity since 2012 assisting with surveys and practical conservation activities.

Lessons Learned/Challenges

15. From the data available we are confident that there have been some strong achievements on the ground in establishing and strengthening wildlife connections. However, it is also recognised that competing priorities and challenges to secure resources for the long term (both within the Authority and with partners) have had a limiting effect on these achievements. The scale of work required to make a long term difference has not matched the staff resources available and a longer term approach is needed for interventions to be more effective and sustainable.
16. A stronger landscape scale vision supported with in-depth and consistent strategic thinking, which takes a broader view than the artificially bounded numbered connections or governance areas, is recommended for the future. This could be more effective in identifying and delivering activity in priority areas. Planning this work needs to focus on resilience and habitat function to ensure that it is robust for the future, particularly in relation to climate change, extreme weather events and threats associated with globalisation.
17. Target setting, monitoring and record keeping need to be improved for the future and a more robust system put in place for quantifying the amount of work delivered through this program and its effectiveness.
18. The challenge moving forward is to draw on this learning and set it in the context of what we think will be the key external factors impacting on wildlife in the future. Based on this we want to focus on areas of work where we can make the most progress.

Contextual Issues

19. While the Authority has been working to contribute towards wildlife conservation improvements, the context for delivery has been and is continuing to experience significant change.
20. As the table below illustrates there has been a corresponding reduction in the amount of land in environmental schemes within National Parks.
21. This is a time of great uncertainty with farmers and land managers needing to make difficult, long term decisions without knowing the impact of Brexit but with the increasing likelihood of a no-deal scenario. The current intention is to phase out the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) over a 7 year transition period beginning in 2021 with the roll out of the new Environmental Land Management System (ELMS) pilot from 2024, culminating in full scheme roll out by 2028. For many farms in the North York Moors, there is a significant reliance on the BPS and with no certainty that the payments available through ELMS for the delivery of public goods will match the levels of existing farm support, farmers and land managers have to consider how they can position their farm businesses to respond to these changes. This period of uncertainty coincides with a time that a large number of Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ESS) agreements in the North York Moors are expiring and many land managers are choosing not to enter the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, which is the current agri-environment offer that replaced the ESS in 2015. A number of barriers to the take up of the new scheme have been identified; notably a significant drop in payment rates for options relevant to most upland farms and an increase in the administrative burden of the scheme placed on the farmer. Many farmers and land managers consider the risk of a penalty being imposed for an unintended breach of the scheme conditions is too great to the financial return from the scheme. As a consequence, some land that has previously been managed under an agri-environment agreement, some for periods in excess of 20 years, is being brought back into more intensive agricultural use leading to environmental degradation. We are currently undertaking some research work with the University of Bangor to understand the extent of this. Officers have requested up to date information from Natural England to understand the scale of the reduction in land in the National Park managed under an agri-environment scheme.
22. This reduction in land covered by national agri-environment agreements poses a substantial threat to land management and conservation in the National Park, with the potential to undo the gains secured by bringing land into environmental focused management between 2002 and 2015. It is important that a positive trajectory should continue, but at the moment there is no clear information to suggest that land managers will enter into new schemes, what the new schemes will consist of and how the transition from 'old' to new schemes will be managed. Other issues, such as potential changes in environmental legislation, regulation and funding following Brexit compound the current disquiet within the land management community from both an environmental and agronomic perspective.

23. At the same time, at National level, over the past 18 months, a number of contemporary factors have emerged that will impact on the future management of National Parks. In 2018, National Parks England submitted a Roadmap to the Designated Landscape Review (Glover Review) identifying 5 opportunities to improve National Parks and people's experience of them. The first of these identified *National Parks as bigger and better places for nature, connected through wildlife corridors to each other and resilient to climate change* setting National Parks as the cornerstone for Nature Recovery.
24. The North York Moors' own response to the Glover Review recommended that the review should
- Initiate a debate on the implementation powers of National Park Management Plans related to wildlife
 - Review the wildlife powers of organisations working in National Parks and consider how they should be shared with or transferred to National Park Authorities
 - Provide National Park Authorities with the remit to deliver the new Environmental Land Management System
 - Consider whether National Park Authorities should ultimately have the powers to deliver measures that clearly benefit conservation by creating National Park specific legislation for encouraging more wildlife and better habitats
25. Interim findings from the Glover review published on July 16th recognises that more needs to be done to enhance wildlife in National Parks and that *our protected landscapes have not been given the tools, the funding and the direction to do the job we should now expect of them*. The review panel also commented that they *would like to see (designated landscapes) develop landscape scale, long term strategies to assess and improve natural capital in the areas they oversee as it is now, and as it could become - working with landowners through local ELMs plans. A full report with recommendations is expected in the autumn*.
26. There has been a surge of interest and some criticism of the state of wildlife in National Parks. When questioned about what they like and value about National Parks, people often say wildlife and there is an expectation that National Parks will be teeming with wildlife. There have been declines in some species nationally (including in National Parks) due to land management practices, disease and changes in weather patterns. Conversely, other species, such as wading birds, have thrived in this National Park with positive habitat management.
27. The challenge for the Authority in the medium to long term is to find a way, within this complex context, to make a meaningful, measureable contribution through working with land managers, to conserve the special wildlife and habitats of the National Park.

Looking Ahead

28. So, what does all this mean for the future? Learning from the things that have worked well and where there have been challenges, it has been agreed that, for the remainder of the current Business Plan period (to the end of 2021) the Authority should focus on the following priority areas for our work to enhance habitats to benefit wildlife:
- Work on the rivers Esk and Rye
 - Work on restoration of Ancient Woodland Sites and woodland creation
 - Development of a new Environmental Land Management System (ELMS) pilot as part of Defra's tests and trials programme
 - Work on Moorland policy and management

This was agreed by Members in March 2019.

Meanwhile, in light of the changing political, cultural and financial factors alluded to in section 10, the Authority has started to review how it will further enhance habitats and biodiversity in the National Park in the medium and long term future. Discussions at a National level, alongside more North York Moors focused initiatives are helping to inform this future thinking. For example, at the end of June, a workshop took place to discuss what our priorities might be for our wildlife work in the longer term. Representatives from a range of organisations attended including Natural England, the Environment Agency, Forestry England and Yorkshire Wildlife Trust as well as local naturalists and National Park staff. The discussions focused on

“The most important issues/challenges related to wildlife that impact on the North York Moors, what can be done to address these issues, and how they should be prioritised.”

29. These discussions have helped identify potential areas of focus both in the very short term, for the duration of this Business Plan period and in preparation for the development of the new Management Plan and Business Plan over the coming 18 months or so.

Recommendations

30. Current uncertainties aside, at the present time officers recommend the following in relation to our wildlife conservation work in the future:

1. In the immediate future, deliver current committed habitat improvement projects and programmes to the highest possible standard

31. The Authority is currently delivering wildlife conservation initiatives on an unprecedented scale across the National Park. Funding has been secured to work on The Land of Iron partnership as well as Ryevitalise, work on the River Esk and smaller projects such as the Turtle Dove and Landscape Enhancement Initiative projects. All of these are contributing to providing significant habitat improvements. While the context that we are working in is uncertain we must commit to delivering these programmes to the highest possible standard and doing all we can to replicate good practice and learning for the future.

2. Over the next year, work closely with our local landowning and farming community to secure positive future policies for wildlife and land management.

32. As this review has highlighted, the range of issues and levels of uncertainty faced by landowners and farmers is a major issue for the future of wildlife conservation in the National Park. We have a small window of time over the next 6-12 months to do everything we can to inform policy debates and decision making and support our local communities to secure future policies that will be positive for the conservation of the National Park and sustainable for its communities.

3. Work closely with Natural England to ensure a strong understanding of our precious moorland landscape and secure its future

33. It is critical that we maintain close liaison with Natural England to ensure that current issues on the moors and mutual understanding of the status of SSSI condition remain a priority despite reduced resources. We need to continue to work with Natural England to ensure that land managers are supported into stewardship agreements. Without this the condition of the Moors and in-by as an important home for wildlife will deteriorate – we want to avoid and reverse this trend.

4. Implement the new Forestry Commission Accord in the North York Moors

34. Our excellent working relationship with the Forestry Commission is critical to the local delivery of the new national accord. In particular this should cover.

- Decision-making that enhances National Park landscapes and the woodlands in them and recognises the need for high standards in National Parks.
- Woodland creation and expansion in National Parks, based on the Right Tree in the Right Place.
- Exemplary Forestry England and NPA owned / managed woodlands in National Parks.
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5. Long term agreements for landowners and farmers

35. We need to ensure that existing land management agreements for Conservation purposes are monitored to ensure effectiveness and where possible, are extended to ensure that conservation gains are maintained. Also, that any new land management agreements for conservation are set up for as long a period as possible to ensure continuing delivery of conservation outputs, within budgeting constraints.

36. We also need to continue to work closely with DEFRA and Natural England to ensure that land currently under Environmental Stewardship is retained where possible, that transition arrangements between old Stewardship agreements and the new ELM system are in place and that the new ELM system delivers robust environmental outcomes whilst supporting sustainable farm businesses.

Summary

37. Against a backdrop of political and financial uncertainty, the Authority is doing more than it ever has to further the conservation of habitats and species in the park through core and grant funding. We have done some good work and want to do more in order to safeguard this special place and the wildlife that makes its home here. As we work towards the development of our next Management Plan, we will ensure that the experience gained in our work to date is carried forward to further embed wildlife and its importance in the future of the park and into our future priorities.