Summer Leys Nature Reserve © Louise Frohock; Dusk Canoes © Carol MacIntyre Jones; Hay Bales © Martin Rogers; Great Crested Grebes © Victor Penn

Nene Valley NIA: A Business Plan for 2015-2020

NENE VALLEY
Nature • Improvement • Area
connecting people and nature

Contents

Summary

The first Nene Valley Nature Improvement Area (NIA) Business Plan was written in 2011 as part of the application process for the first 12 government-funded NIAs. The business plan set out detailed outcomes and actions to be achieved between April 2012 and March 2015. It also identified a vision and some more aspirational targets for 2020.

After a review of the current 2012-2015 Business Plan it was proposed that a 2015-2020 Business Plan was written. This document will set out the direction of travel for the Nene Valley NIA between 2015 and 2020. Resources are less secure for NIA delivery in this period, so firm targets have not been set.

The aim of the Nene Valley Nature Improvement Area has from the start been to **achieve a step-change in the mechanisms for delivering nature conservation to create a resilient ecological network in the Nene Valley.**

A series of meetings and workshops of NIA partners and stakeholders was held to discuss the forward plan. The conclusion was that NIA delivery will continue to focus on improving nature through the five objectives previously established.

1. Growth and Development will support, value and benefit the natural environment resulting in net gain in biodiversity by 2020
2. Enhance public awareness, access and benefits of the NIA in a sustainable and sympathetic way, while ensuring that the designated sites at the core remain in favourable condition.
3. Improve ecological status of the river and enhance ecosystem service provision.
4. Strengthen the ecological network through effective engagement with farmers and landowners.
5. Investigate the potential to market the ecosystem services provided by the Nene Valley.

The experience gained from the 3-year funded programme has enabled the partnership to form more specific aspirations relating to:

- Planning and development
- Access and recreation in and around the Special Protection Area
- Securing the condition of the Special Protection Area
- River restoration
- Land management for priority habitats and water quality
- Ecosystem services

Vision

The 2015-20 aim can be expanded now to read:

We will achieve a step-change in the mechanisms for delivering nature conservation to create a resilient ecological network in the Nene Valley.

A resilient ecological network in the Nene Valley will:
- Support large areas of priority habitat which are well managed and support stable and increasing populations of a wide diversity of native and locally distinctive species, including important pollinating insects.
- Have clean water in its rivers and lakes which supports a good diversity and number of plants, insects, fish, birds and mammals.
- Provide large areas for recreation without impacting negatively on wildlife or other land management activities.

What does a resilient ecological network look like? This has been presented visually in the form of an illustration on the following page. Based on the illustration each objective can be summarised as follows:

Objective 1: Planning & Development
- Sustainable developments complement the landscape. New ponds and meadows collect water runoff while new hedgerows connect existing habitats.
- Long-distance cycleways connect communities along the valley, providing new recreational opportunities and habitat corridors as well as better managed access to wildlife.
- New developments protect and enhance as well as buffer and link surrounding habitats through habitat creation and improved green infrastructure.

Objective 2: Access & Recreation
- Access is well managed to ensure visitors get a great experience without disturbing the wildlife they have come to see.
- Gravel pits and surrounding wetlands support large numbers of wading birds and waterfowl.
- Local communities better know and value their local wildlife.

Objective 3: River Restoration
- Fish and eels are able to move upstream to find places to breed and develop thanks to improvements to weirs.
- River meanders create shallow, fast flowing riffles and slow, deep pools which provide a rich variety of habitats.
- Backwaters provide vital spawning and refuge habitat for fish.
- Improved water quality and riparian habitats support a greater range of wildlife along the Nene

Objective 4: Land Management
- Wildflower field margins and well-maintained hedgerows soak up water, collect loose soil and absorb pollutants before they reach the river.
- Water quality is improved by keeping grazing animals away from the river bank, and trees help to provide habitats for insects and fish in the river.
- Floodplain hay meadows are full of wildflowers and are a haven for pollinating insects like butterflies and bees.

- Wetland habitats are restored to provide nesting opportunities for breeding birds and other wildlife.

Objective 5: Ecosystem Services

This objective is over-arching; all of the comments above are related in some way to improving the provision of Ecosystem Services.

- The Nene is navigable downstream from Northampton and is a popular way to explore the Nene Valley by canoe or boat.
- Meadows and other wetland habitats provide natural flood defences for communities downstream.
- Natural capital and the Ecosystem services that they provide are better understood and valued by communities, business and local authorities in the Nene Valley. They are recognised as a valuable asset rather than as a constraint to development.
- Natural capital and the provision of ecosystem services are protected and enhanced through the planning system and through new projects and investments.

Our vision for the Nene Valley...

Wildflower field margins and well-maintained hedgerows soak up water, collect loose soil and absorb pollutants before they reach the river.

Access is well managed to ensure visitors get a great experience without disturbing the wildlife they have come to see.

Backwaters provide vital spawning and refuge habitat for fish.

Gravel pits and surrounding wetlands support large numbers of wading birds and waterfowl.

Many species of fish lay their eggs on clean gravel on the riverbed.

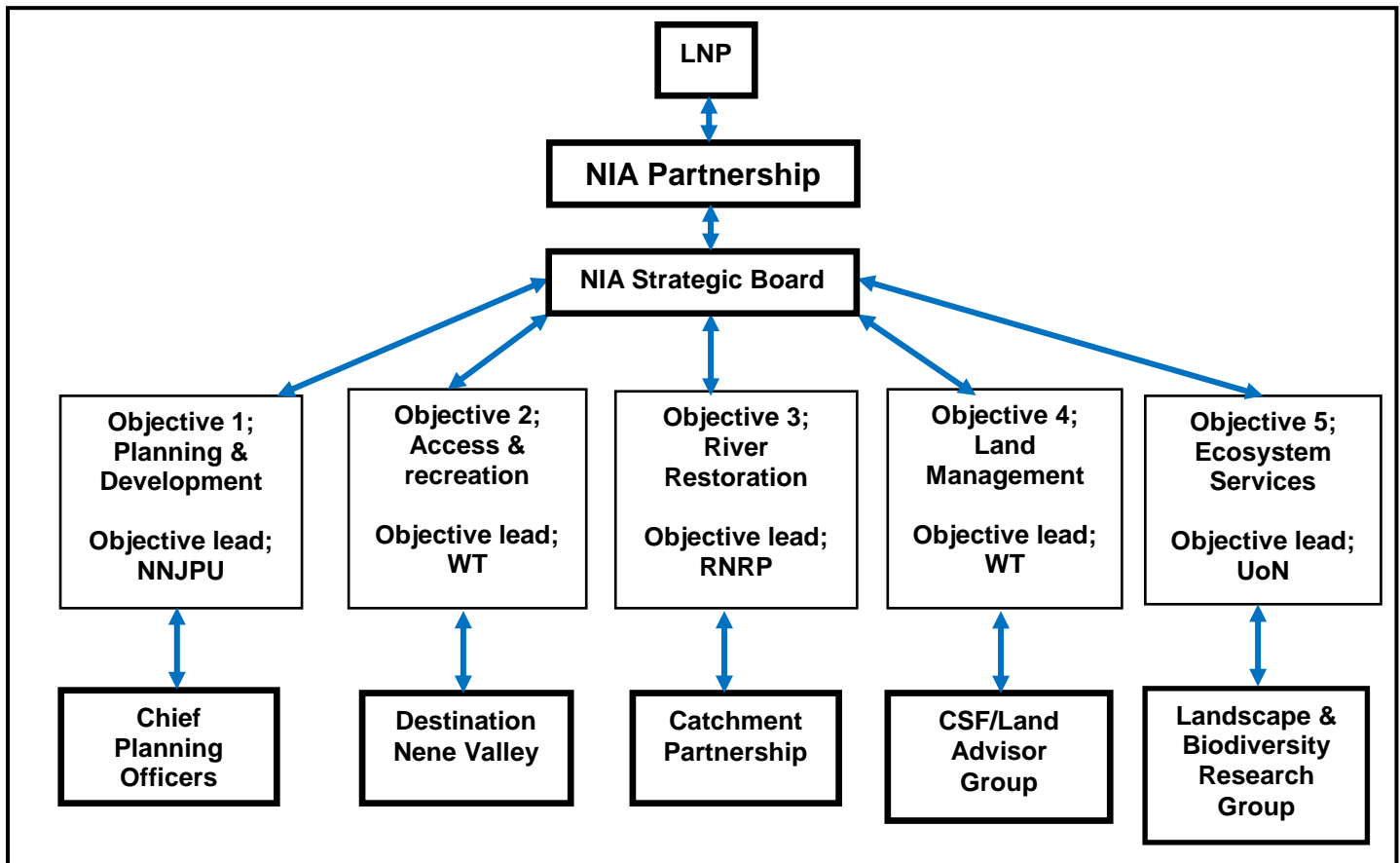Plants growing on the riverbed and bank provide food and cover for fish and invertebrates

Water quality is improved by keeping grazing animals away from the river bank, and trees help to provide habitats for insects and fish in the river.

Fish and eels are able to move upstream to find places to breed and develop thanks to improvements to weirs.

River meanders create shallow, fast flowing riffles and slow, deep pools which provide a rich variety of habitats.

Floodplain hay meadows are full of wildflowers and are a haven for pollinating insects like butterflies and bees.

Sustainable developments complement the landscape. New ponds and meadows collect water runoff and enhance important wildlife sites.

Long-distance cycleways connect communities along the valley and provide new recreational opportunities.

The Nene is navigable downstream from Northampton and is a popular way to explore the Nene Valley by canoe or boat.

lapwing

golden plover

bittern

tufted ducks

banded demoiselle

knapweed

ragged robin

scabious

marsh marigold

kingfisher

water crowfoot

mayfly

eel

trout

grey heron

otter

yellow iris

curlew

meadow brown

small tortoiseshell

meadowsweet

meadow foxtail

great burnet

Partnership structure

Through stakeholder workshops the partnership and reporting structure were discussed and presented to the NIA Board. The following structure has been proposed for 2015-20, which streamlines the partnership structure whilst continuing to ensure complex interdisciplinary and cross-boundary issues are tackled effectively.

- The LNP retains an overall overview of the NIA partnership.
- The NIA project board will continue as a link between the five work streams and the partnership / LNP. The project board will meet three times a year on a four monthly basis.
- Objectives will no longer have working groups, however each objective has a nominated lead and an existing group to report to and gain guidance from.
- The Planning work stream reports back to the Chief Planning Officers group. This provides an opportunity to influence and inform planning policy at the County level.
- The Access work stream reports through the Destination Nene Valley project board. This provides the opportunity to influence and inform this tourism focussed initiative.
- The River Restoration work streams operate under and report back to the Nene Catchment Partnership, allowing access to expertise and funding sources.
- The Land advisor work stream will continue to work closely with Catchment Sensitive Farming to deliver joined up land management advice across the catchment.
- The ecosystem services work stream will be led through the Landscape & Biodiversity Research Group at the University of Northampton.

Local Nature Partnership

The NIA will continue to support the aims of the Northamptonshire Local Nature Partnership, which are:

1. helping to improve our natural world, with special focus on the River Nene;

2. helping local people get personal benefit from local nature;

3. helping habitats and pollinators flourish, through new investment and sustainable development.

The NIA will work with the LNP and other partnerships operating across the catchment to create a clear offer of what our works collectively offers wider partners, how it complements the health & well-being agenda and growth aspirations.

A well planned environmental infrastructure is an important foundation on which to build sustainable economic growth and create healthy communities.
- we will effectively highlight the clear interdependencies between a healthy, high quality natural environment and the economy
- we will show that working with us to help plan the provision of high quality green infrastructure improves the desirability of an area and helps communities to flourish.

Objectives & delivery arrangements

Impacts will either be measured annually (*in bold italics*) though the NIA indicators or assessed at the end of the 2015-2020 business plan timeframe.

Objective 1: Planning & Development

Aim	Objectives & Proposed Actions	Delivery mechanisms	Measuring impact
Ensure new development can demonstrate an increase in priority wildlife habitat	Develop a mechanism for measuring BAP habitat lost, restored and created through development.	• Planning validation and consultations	• Mechanism developed and in place
Development achieves a nett planning gain in favour of biodiversity	Through standing advice and ongoing guidance ensure new developments deliver an increase in BAP priority habitat and no net loss of tier 1 & 2 sites.	• Adoption of Biodiversity SPD update (includes NIA specifics) • Adoption of SPA SPD and mitigation strategy for the SPA • Planning consultations • Embed NIA in planning policy • Ensure up-to-date data searches	• ***Area of tier 1 & 2 sites***
Development which helps to reverse habitat fragmentation and which increases landscape connectivity.	Review and update all relevant GI Strategies and Delivery Plans to reflect NIA objectives so that development can be linked to the GI projects and themes so as to secure S106 contributions.	• Review of GI strategies • Planning policy consultations • S106 contributions	• S106 contributions to NIA related aims or projects • ***Habitat connectivity***
A uniform approach to growth and development in respect of the NIA within Planning Policy, Strategy and delivery.	Embed the principles of the NIA into Public Policy, Strategy, Plans and Programmes at all levels of the Local Planning hierarchy as well as Neighbourhood Planning.	• Planning policy consultations • Adoption of Biodiversity SPD update	• Number of policies/documents reflecting NIA objectives
Long-term funding mechanism for the NIA explored and secured by means of developer contributions.	Ensure NIA related aims or projects are encompassed in LPA's CIL and S106 funded projects.	• Create list of priority projects • Embed in appropriate policy documents • S106/CIL contributions	• CIL & S106 contributions to NIA related aims or projects

Objective 2: Access & Recreation

Aim	Objectives & Proposed Actions	Delivery mechanisms	Measuring impact
Increase our understanding of wildlife use and sensitivity in the Nene Valley	To undertake a regular suite of wildlife surveys, with a particular focus on breeding and overwintering birds within the SPA, to allow us to highlight areas of sensitivity and monitor change.	• WeBS • Repeat BBS	• *WeBS and BBS results*
Growth in visitor numbers occurs without damaging key protected sites and the species they hold.	Secure the condition of the SPA, in particular deliver the site actions plans delivered through community panels at Northampton Washlands and Summer Leys.	• Nene Valley HLF Project • Community panels • Planning policy and development • Adoption of mitigation strategy for the SPA	• *WeBS and BBS results* • *Percentage of SSSI in favourable management* • Site action plan recommendations achieved
Promotion and improvement of the Nene Valley as a destination for visitors	Improve the quality of visitor facilities/visitor experience at key sites to develop the Nene Valley as a destination for wildlife tourism.	• Nene wetlands • Nene Valley HLF Project • Destination Nene Valley	• *Number of visitors to key sites* • One repeat visitor survey to be carried out by 2020
Local communities have a greater understanding of the NIA and its value through improved access and engagement.	Increase awareness of NIA and its wildlife and importance amongst visitors and local communities through online communication, events	• Nene Valley festival • Websites/social media • Nene wetlands	• *No of visits to relevant websites/ social media channels*. • One repeat visitor survey to be carried out by 2020. • *Number of visitors to key sites*

Objective 3: River Restoration

Aim	Objectives & Proposed Actions	Delivery mechanisms	Measuring impact
Improve the quality of the river through overseeing the realisation of the Nene Integrated Catchment Management Plan	Achieving improvements in water quality through the CSF partnership and other initiatives	• CSF • Nene Valley HLF Project • NVCP	• EA Water quality monitoring
Improve the quality of riverine habitats through coordinated	Deliver projects identified by the RRO walkovers through;	• NVCP projects • Planning policy and	• Number of project delivered

partnerships and projects	• enabling co-ordinated efficient delivery of river improvement projects • supporting cross boundary working • providing a mechanism to 'pool' funding to deliver multifunctional projects	development • Nene Valley HLF Project	• Km of rivers restored • *Extent of wetland habitats in the Nene Valley*
Improved access to and green infrastructure links through the catchment	Informing the development of suitable planning policy and GI strategies, improved Green Infrastructure links through the catchment & improved access to and amenity of the river corridor	• Planning policy and development • Nene Valley HLF Project	• *Number of visitors to key sites* • One repeat visitor survey to be carried out by 2020
Maintaining and improving the profile of the River Nene	Increasing awareness of the river amongst stakeholders and the general public.	• NVCP • Nene Valley HLF Project	• *No of visits to relevant websites/ social media channels*. • One repeat visitor survey to be carried out by 2020

Objective 4: Land Management

Aim	Objectives & Proposed Actions	Delivery mechanisms	Measuring impact
Bigger; To increase the extent of species-rich grassland in the Nene Valley	To increase the amount of lowland meadow in the Nene Valley by restoring and creating new meadows	• Appropriate targeting of options in the higher tier of CSS. • Grant scheme for new meadow creation through Nene Valley HLF Project	• *Extent of Lowland Meadow in the Nene Valley.* • *Area of land under target agri-environment options.*
Better; To improve the quality of wetland habitats in the Nene Valley	To increase the amount of degraded wetland habitat (floodplain grazing marsh, fen and wet meadows) that is in positive management, providing better habitat for breeding waders and overwintering waterfowl	• Advice to landowners through the LWS project led by the Wildlife Trust. • Appropriate targeting of options in CSS • Nene Valley HLF Project	• *% of tier 1 & 2 sites in positive/favourable management* • *Area of land under target agri-environment options*
Joined up; sympathetic management of farmland surrounding priority habitat	Increase the amount of land in new higher and mid-level Countryside Stewardship scheme, in particular targeting land buffering priority habitat	• Appropriate targeting of options in CSS • Promotion of CSS to local farmers	• *WeBS and BBS results* • *Area of land under target agri-environment options* • *Habitat connectivity*
Communicated; good partnership working and unified approach to land management advice	Maintain joint working group with CSF to provide unified approach to land management Ensure land owners have a good understanding of the	• Joint working group with CSF meeting at least twice per year	• Established group meeting regularly • *Area of land under target*

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| | NIA and easy access to support and information | • Events, surveys and site visits | *agri-environment options* |

Objective 5: Ecosystem Services

Aim	Objectives & Proposed Actions	Delivery mechanisms	Measuring impact
Increased understanding and appreciation of the value of Ecosystem Services provision in the Nene Valley	Clear understanding by local communities, businesses and local authorities of the value and benefits of ecosystem services in the Nene Valley. Mapping portal developed to display maps of ecosystem services as part of NCC website. Further research undertaken to understand the links between natural capital (biodiversity and habitats) and ecosystem services and into urban pollinators	• NIA partnership • LNP • University research / Natural Capital Solutions Ltd	• *No of visits to relevant websites/ social media channels*.
Integrate Ecosystem Services into planning policy and new developments	ES embedded into local planning policies and integrated as part of good planning and design in new developments Investigate potential for writing Ecosystem services SPD to accompany North Northants Joint Core Strategy Introduction to ecosystem services for planners and developers written and circulated widely	• Planning policy • Development control • University / Natural Capital Solutions Ltd • Ecosystem Services SPD	• Number of policies/documents reflecting ES objectives
Ecosystem Services have a local economic value	Opportunities for PES (Payments for ecosystem services) identified and developed Work with organisations such as Anglian Water and Network Rail to deliver PES, offsetting schemes and Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTP)	• University research • LNP	• Number of PES schemes
Suitable locations for enhancing natural capital and ecosystem services in the Nene Valley identified	Habitat opportunity mapping performed to identify most suitable areas to expand habitats for ecology and wider ecosystem services such as natural flood risk management and enhancing water quality Areas identified taken forward in new projects	• University / Natural Capital Solutions Ltd • LNP	• Report produced • Projects underway that utilise the information provided
Natural Capital Investment Plan produced to focus and encourage investment in the Nene Valley	NCIP identifies opportunities, and measures the costs and benefits of investing in natural capital, Presents the case for investment as a prospectus that can be presented to businesses and other interested parties.	• University / Natural Capital Solutions Ltd • LNP	• NCIP published • Projects underway

Measuring impact

There are a number of indicators contained in the NIA Monitoring and Evaluation Framework which would be useful to continue monitoring. These indicators must be straightforward to monitor using freely available data, and with limited staff time. The indicators which are chosen should reflect the priorities of the partnership and the objectives that have been set for 2015-2020. These are mainly related to habitat connectivity, water quality, extent of habitat, and condition of habitat. These indicators will be monitored on an annual basis. The suggested indicators for ongoing reporting are:

- Extent of and proportion of tier 1 and 2 sites in favourable condition (i.e. SSSIs in favourable or recovering condition, and proportion of LWS in positive conservation management.
- Total extent of existing priority habitat (using Wildlife Trust Priority Habitat Maps, updated annually)
- Status of focal species (using data collected by volunteers on a set of wintering and breeding birds, not always updated annually)
- Comparative indicator of habitat connectivity (using data out of BARS, or a set of measures such as patch size from Priority Habitat Maps)
- Area of more sustainable agricultural production (using agri-environment scheme data)
- Number of visits to relevant websites / social media channels (nenevalleynia.org)
- Number of visitors to key wildlife sites (Stanwick Lakes, Country Parks, Ferry Meadows, Rushden Lakes, Nene Valley Festival)

NIAs were established to implement the 'Bigger, Better, More, and Joined' mantra set out in the 2010 Making Space for Nature report. The indicators which continue to be monitored in the Nene Valley NIA should relate back to this. A number of mechanisms for measuring impact related to each objective have been identified in the previous section. This table sets out how these and the overarching indicators will be monitored:

#	Indicator	Category	Data required	Person / group responsible	Protocol	Existing baseline	Caveats
1	Extent of tier 1 & 2 sites & % in favourable condition (% SSSI in favourable condition & % LWS in positive management)	Bigger Better	• Annual LWS and SSSI layers. • LWS Positive conservation Management (PCM) data • SSSI condition monitoring data	Matt Johnson, Wildlife Trust Natural England	• Area (ha) of LWS and SSSI in the NIA • % and area of LWS in PCM (according to NI197 method) in NIA and NIA+3km buffer. • % and area in favourable or recovering condition in the NIA.	Figures reported in 2012/13	SSSI not reassessed annually
2	Extent of priority habitat in the NIA	Bigger More	Priority Habitat GIS layers, updated annually	Matt Johnson, Wildlife Trust	Total extent of each priority habitat found in the NIA	Figures reported annually since 2012.	This data is subject to variability caused by improved knowledge as well as actual changes. Habitat will only be recorded on these maps once it reaches LWS standard.

3	Area of land under target agri-environment options.	Better Bigger More	Agri-environment GIS layers from Natural England	Natural England supplies the data.	Extent of land covered by priority options in NIA and NIA+3km buffer – identified for HLS and ELS in 2012. New priorities for CSS need to be determined.	Figures reported annually since 2012.	The data has historically been inconsistent for no obvious reason.
4	Status of focal species	Bigger Better More Joined	Webs and breeding bird surveys	BTO/NE/RSPB	Trend in species (either wintering peak count or number of breeding pairs) based on at least 3 years of data for list of priority species, in the Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits SSSI/SPA.	Reported in April 2015	Breeding bird surveys not completed over entire area annually. Webs data can be incomplete in some years.
5	Habitat connectivity	Joined	Priority habitat layers	Matt Johnson, Wildlife Trust	Figures for the total extent of Priority habitat in the NIA, number of habitat patches and average patch size. Adjacent areas of different habitat type are considered as separate patches.	Annually since 2012-13	The average and total patch size may be exaggerated by the inclusion of open water.
6	No of visits to relevant websites/ social media channels		Website analytics	Matt Johnson, Wildlife Trust	Download annual website analytic figures	Annually since 2012-13	
7	Number of visitors to key sites		Visitor numbers	WT/RFT/DNV/ NCC/ NPT	Combine annual visitors to key sites and NV festival	none	Figures may be calculated differently by each organisation

A number of other measures are outlined in the objectives and delivery arrangements tables in order to assess the success of each objective. These impacts will be measured at the end of the 2015-20 timeframe.

Funding strategy

Immediate funding opportunities include;

- **HLF Landscape Partnership**
  - Nenescape landscape partnership; Community engagement, interpretation of and access to heritage, river restoration, restoration and creation of meadows. Project in development stage with stage 2 application expected in 2017.
- **Catchment Sensitive Farming Project**
  - Partnership project delivering improvements to water quality through Countryside Stewardship and landowner engagement.
- **Water for Wildlife (Anglian Water)**
  - Deliver river restoration projects and improvements to water quality

Long term funding mechanisms include;

- **Payments for Ecosystem Services**
  - Payments for ecosystem services (PES) is a term used to describe a range of schemes through which the beneficiaries, or users, of ecosystem services provide payment to the stewards, or providers of those services.
- **LIFE**
  - European funding for restoration of degraded ecosystems and delivery of ecosystem services centred on the SPA
- **Biodiversity Offsetting**
  - Biodiversity offsets are conservation activities that are designed to give biodiversity benefits to compensate for losses - ensuring that when a development damages nature (and this damage cannot be avoided) new, bigger or better nature sites will be created.
- **Countryside Stewardship**
  - Countryside Stewardship ("the scheme") provides incentives for land managers to look after their environment. The scheme is open to all eligible farmers, woodland owners, foresters and other land managers through a competitive application process.
- **Countryside Stewardship Scheme Facilitator Fund**
  - Coordination of Countryside Stewardship applications to ensure joined up applications maximising benefits to the Nene Valley.
- **Community Infrastructure Levy & S106 contributions from new developments**
  - The Community Infrastructure Levy is a planning charge, introduced by the Planning Act 2008 as a tool for local authorities in England and Wales to help deliver infrastructure to support the development of their area. S106 contributions may be required through a planning agreement to make the planning application acceptable.
- **Local Enterprise Partnerships**
  - NEP and its partners work with government to unlock Northamptonshire's growth potential and build on its success as one of the most entrepreneurial and fastest growing places in the country; aiming to increase the local economy from £16 billion to £20 billion in 7 years and bring about unprecedented growth and prosperity for our businesses, people and communities. The NIA also falls into the boundaries of the SEM LEP and Gt Cambs & Gt P'boro LEP, which have similar aims and remit. Key funds are the European Structural Investment Funds and Local Growth Fund.

Communications and community engagement

Website
The Nene Valley NIA website **www.nenevalleynia.org** is currently hosted by Kinetic (www.kineticwecreate.co.uk). The site is established using a WordPress framework which is simple to use. However, full administration rights remain with Kinetic so we are tied to them for future structural changes. We don't currently pay any hosting or management fees to Kinetic 'for the duration of the project'.

The website includes the interactive map, dialogue functions, a photo gallery, informative pages, and a download page. The responsibility for maintaining the website should be split between different members of the partnership. Wildlife Trust, RNRP and University of Northampton have administrator rights. Very little day to day maintenance is required, but content should be updated on a regular basis by:

- Adding news stories
- Changing the text on the homepage
- Changing the photos on the homepage
- Adding new outputs as downloadable documents
- Checking for inappropriate content in posts
- Updating the text on the Project pages.

Occasional (e.g. once annual) attempts should be made to promote the website through activities such as the successful 2014 photo competition.

Media
Having established a good relationship with BBC Radio Northampton this should be established by sharing regular press releases with them and offering interviewees. Nene Valley News is also a useful outlet to reach local communities.

The 'brand' of the NIA and the principle of 'landscape-scale conservation' should be used in all publicity in order to give the weight of the partnership to the messages we want to publicise. This may help to reduce confusing messages from different organisations and give a stronger feeling of unity.

Events
There are opportunities to deliver events for a range of different audiences through the work of the objectives. Wider reaching events could be delivered alongside the Nene Valley Festival, usually held in autumn each year. The festival is organised by the Destination Nene Valley Project Board.

Community engagement
Community engagement can be "broad" or "deep" but not both. There is value in both approaches, but the challenge of applying our learning to secure change in recreational activities and understanding of the environment on a broad scale remains.

The HLF Landscape Partnership Project offers huge opportunities to implement both broad and deep community engagement across the Nene Valley and the nearby settlements.

National collaboration
The network of NIAs across England will provide ongoing support and profile for activities delivered by the Nene Valley NIA. The original 12 funded NIAs all intend to continue working as an NIA in some format, and the number of locally-determined NIAs is increasing.

NIAs are recognised in the National Planning Policy Framework and are increasingly being recognised in other national strategy and policy documents, so the NIA brand is likely to remain.

Nene Valley 2020 Vision

A vision for 2020 was written in 2011. This vision still stands largely as it is, but has been updated based on the developments during the last 3 years.

Vision set in 2015

 "I moved to Northamptonshire in 2020. My company relocated to a great new business park in Northampton – it's comfortable inside but even better outside. I can walk by the river at lunch and see kingfishers around the reedbed we built to clean our waste water. I love the countryside here, there's a whole river valley where you can get close to nature and enjoy it.

"Protected sites lie at the heart of the valley but to be honest, because of the improvements that have been made across the landscape; on the ground they're not quite as obvious as once they were. The whole of the river in Northampton has had a facelift and I can now enjoy a walk right through the town along the bank. It's like the town centre has got its own green lung. There's a new gateway to the river Nene on the edge of Wellingborough just upstream from a massive Wildlife Trust nature reserve, which I can explore."

"It seems everyone is thinking about nature around here. There's always so much to see and do and opportunities to get involved. I can go on bat safaris up the river by canoe, volunteer at my local reserve or just explore by foot, bike, train or boat. There are the new hides and paths down on the lake where I can watch the waterbirds gather in winter. It's a bit different from the barbed wire and steep bank that used to be there and with the hides the birds don't fly off in panic as soon as you appear. It's an amazing sight."

"I like to see the river flooding in winter where it's supposed to, and not in my kitchen. The fact that the flood defence is also a marsh that's great for water voles is a bonus. I live in a new estate where the developers planted a new woodland my family enjoys every day. They planted it next to an old wood full of bluebells and put in paths so we can get down to the river without going on the road. A Sunday walk along the valley really recharges the batteries and the kids love it. We can now get on our bikes and ride from Northampton to Peterborough through a near seamless succession of wetlands alive with warblers, dragonflies and flower-rich meadows. Clear directions and some great local attractions make it a great day out."

"I can't remember the last time I couldn't see to the bottom of the river. No more smell of effluent or rainbow slicks from runoff. I see a lot more anglers now, I guess because of all the fish I spot in the clear water. They'll have to compete with the otters though!"