

# 1. Nene Valley

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## Project Name: Community Panel Public Dialogue Project

### Project Description

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#### What are the objectives of the project?

To provide members of the public the opportunity to engage with the technical and scientific issues relevant to recreation and access at key sites within the NIA.

#### What activities does the project include?

In late 2012, three of the 12 NIAs applied for funds to embed public dialogue into local policy making. All three projects were successful and received approval for support valued between £37-46,000 each over two years. The Nene Valley NIA was one of these. Funds were jointly provided by Natural England and Sciencewise. An independent facilitator was appointed by the funders to work with the Nene Valley NIA partners to scope out and deliver the public dialogue.

The project plan, as it was agreed in early 2013, consisted of three workstreams over two years. One of these – Community Panels – is the focus of this case study.

The plan was to set up Community Panel(s) centred on key locations within the Special Protection Area (SPA) at the heart of the NIA to consider, and to address issues around the use of these sites. These Panels were to draw up action plans and make recommendations to the NIA Board.

#### Year 1

In year 1 of the project (2013/14) a Community Panel was formed to look at the issues at Northampton Washland. The intention was to use this as a pilot for further Community Panels to run in year 2 of the project (2014/15).



Figure 1: The washlands (Credit Colin Wilkinson)

The Washland was chosen as the pilot project because it is one of the most important parts of the SPA - particularly for wintering golden plovers and wigeon. It is also a popular site for informal recreation including bird watching, dog walking and jogging. Some visitors and dogs stray from the footpaths and disturb the birds, and the tenant farmer also reports significant problems with dogs worrying and even killing sheep. In addition, the Washland is an operational flood storage reservoir.

Part of the reasoning in selecting this site for the pilot project was a formal evidence base that showed that recreational disturbance was causing problems for the wintering bird populations at this site.



Figure 2: Dog on leash (Credit Anon)

Recruitment for the Northampton Washland Community Panel took place in autumn 2013. This took longer than expected, but 12 people in total participated in the Panel. The group represented a good spread of interests including birdwatchers, dog walkers and outdoor recreation enthusiasts. On-site advertising, including posters with a contact number, backed up by a couple of days of on-site time from NIA partners (the River Nene Regional Park & the Wildlife Trust) speaking to potential Panel members, proved much more productive than newspaper articles.

Crucially, despite expressing initial concerns about the intention behind the creation of the Panel, the site's tenant farmer attended all of its meetings and participated fully in discussions. Active participation by Natural England and RSPB staff was also crucial, providing technical expertise and acting as a "sounding board" for ideas generated by the Panel.

The Panel met four times in total, as follows:

Meeting	Attendees	Actions
<b>Meeting 1: 4<sup>th</sup> December 2013</b>	Attended by 6 members of the public, plus RSPB, River Nene Regional Park, Natural England.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explained role and purpose of the Panel.</li> <li>Discussed the parameters of the Panel's work.</li> <li>Developed an overview of the issues in Northampton Washlands.</li> </ul>
<b>Meeting 2: 21<sup>st</sup> January 2014</b>	Attended by 9 members of the public, plus River Nene Regional Park, Natural England.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discussed 'vision' /and aspirations for the site.</li> <li>Considered the benefits, issues and problems related to the site ecology, agriculture, recreational use, and flood prevention purpose.</li> </ul>
<b>Meeting 3: 25<sup>th</sup> February 2014</b>	Attended by 6 members of the public, plus RSPB, River Nene Regional Park, 3KQ observer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generated actions related to the site ecology, agriculture, recreational use, and flood prevention purpose - reflecting the agreed vision.</li> </ul>
<b>Interim meeting: 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2014</b>	Attended by 2 members of the public, plus RSPB.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Daytime meeting to coincide with facilitator being in Northampton, with open invitation for Panel members to join the meeting to help sort the actions generated at meeting 3.</li> </ul>

Meeting	Attendees	Actions
<b>Final meeting: 11<sup>th</sup> March 2014</b>	Attended by 5 members of the public, plus River Nene Regional Park.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examined the action sheets developed following the interim meeting to formulate proposals to go to the NIA Board. Very constructive meeting with 2 options for specific ways forward to address recreational / dog disturbance.</li> <li>• All 5 attendees expressed an interest in continuing to be involved with the site in a voluntary capacity, possibly through a 'Friends Of' group.</li> </ul>

This work fed into an outline action plan that included a vision for the site, plus recommendations for a range of management activities. The plan was presented to the NIA Board on 18th March 2014. At this meeting NIA members expressed their gratitude for the work done by Panel members; and committed to exploring the action plan in more detail including seeking funds for those activities that would require investment.

#### **Box 1: The agreed vision – Northampton Washland**

*In 2020 Northampton Washlands will:*

- *Perform its purposes as a flood prevention scheme*
- *Retain the high ecological value of its bird populations and maintain its protected status*
- *Provide access for the general public along the Public Right of Way and the permitted paths*
- *Provide for well managed recreation*
- *Provide information to and engage its users, and*
- *Be a site for sustainable agricultural use.*

*A management plan will be in place that includes details about how these purposes are managed in a complementary way so that no single purpose adversely affects the others.*

The level of debate and engagement during the Panel meetings was of a very high standard. All attendees demonstrated a willingness to share their own knowledge, as well as to learn from others. Participants were enabled through skilled facilitation to engage with complex technical issues, and to produce clear thinking and constructive deliberation.

The key aspect of this process was that it was aimed at the general public – this was not about securing a representative sample of interest groups or key stakeholders. The NIA was keen that no Panel members had a specific interest in the site – some were seasoned bird watchers and recorders; someone was interested in local history; someone had recently written a book on future relationship between our economy and the environment; mixed with dog walkers and recreational users of the site. This balance was felt to be crucial to the development of a balanced and achievable vision for the site.



Figure 3: The washlands (Credit Colin Wilkinson)

## Year 2

The NIA experience of running the Washland Community Panel was reviewed and the learning noted in order to feed into the roll out of further Panels. The planning group examined the findings of the recently published visitor survey, a major piece of research commissioned by the NIA<sup>1</sup>. They established that two further sites merited attention through the formation of a Community Panel. Given these sites were immediately adjacent, and that visitor pressure on one would have a knock-on impact on the other, it was decided to create one Community Panel to cover them together, for Summer Leys and Mary's Lake.

The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire and Peterborough purchased Summer Leys Local Nature Reserve in 2008 with funding from Natural England through Defra's Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund and the Department of Communities and Local Government.

Previously the reserve was owned by Hanson Aggregates UK and leased to Northamptonshire County Council who, through working with the Wildlife Trust, developed the site and designated it as a local nature reserve, to help ensure that the site was accessible for future generations to enjoy. Like many other areas in the Nene Valley, the reserve was formed following gravel and sand extraction and designed to create the right conditions for a variety of wildlife, for example by minimising access to the lake by users and dogs. The habitats created are the flooded gravel pits, flood meadows, species rich neutral grassland and mature hedges. The reserve is part of a larger Site of Special Scientific Interest, which is an important refuge for wintering and breeding birds, including golden plover, lapwing, wigeon and shoveler, and is located in a rural area.

The status of Mary's Lake is different and remains under the ownership of Hanson Aggregates. Public rights of way run along two sides of the lake and, until recently, these have been linked by informal access along the third. The angling syndicate that is licensed to fish on the lake has recently blocked this route.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nenevalleynia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Footprint-Ecology-Upper-Nene-Valley-Gravel-Pits-SPA-Visitor-Survey-screenres.pdf>

Early in the Community Panel process participants decided to consider the two lakes as a single site, and this in turn became one of the Panel's aspiration – that Mary's Lake would come into public ownership at some point in the future and could then be actively managed alongside Summer Leys.

The experience of recruiting for this Community Panel was similar to that for the Washland. The start of the process was set back when not enough people came forward, but with more intensive recruitment methods, including more time on site, a total of 14 members of the public eventually volunteered to take part. Active participation by Natural England, the RSPB and the Wildlife Trust Reserves Manager was again crucial in providing technical expertise to the deliberations, as well as a degree of credibility to the process from the perspective of the participants.

The Panel met six times in total, as follows:

Meeting	Attendees	Actions
<b>Meeting 1:</b> <b>23<sup>rd</sup></b> <b>September</b> <b>2014</b>	Attended by 5 members of the public, plus RSPB, River Nene Regional Park, Wildlife Trust.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explained role and purpose of the Panel.</li> <li>Discussed the parameters of the Panel's work.</li> <li>Developed an overview of the issues in Summer Leys / Mary's Lake.</li> </ul>
<b>Meeting 2:</b> 7 <sup>th</sup> <b>October 2014</b>	Attended by 11 members of the public, plus River Nene Regional Park, Natural England, Wildlife Trust.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discussed 'vision' /and aspirations for the site.</li> <li>Drafted vision for the site.</li> </ul>
<b>Meeting 3:</b> <b>21<sup>st</sup> October</b> <b>2014</b>	Attended by 8 members of the public, plus RSPB, River Nene Regional Park, RSPB, Natural England, Sciencewise observer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Considered the benefits, issues and problems related to the site ecology / wildlife, recreational use, and land management.</li> </ul>
<b>Meeting 4:</b> 4 <sup>th</sup> <b>November</b> <b>2014</b>	Attended by 11 members of the public, plus RSPB, Natural England, River Nene Regional Park, Wildlife Trust.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vision confirmed.</li> <li>Analysis of the benefits, issues and problems related to the site ecology / wildlife, recreational use, and land management.</li> </ul>
<b>Meeting 5:</b> <b>18<sup>th</sup></b> <b>November</b> <b>2014</b>	Attended by 12 members of the public, plus River Nene Regional Park, RSPB, Natural England, Wildlife Trust.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drafting actions to move from the current position to realise the agreed vision.</li> <li>Refining the actions.</li> <li>Sorting actions against a matrix: 'must have' or 'nice to have' plus 'hard to implement' or 'easy to implement'.</li> </ul>
<b>Meeting 6:</b> <b>2<sup>nd</sup> December</b> <b>2014</b>	Attended by 11 members of the public, plus River Nene Regional Park, RSPB, Natural England, Wildlife Trust.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examined the actions in more detail formulate proposals to go to the NIA Board.</li> <li>A number of attendees expressed an interest in continuing to be involved with the site in a voluntary capacity, possibly through re establishing a 'Friends Of' group (including one volunteer to co-ordinate the group).</li> </ul>

Several other activities took place in addition to these formal meetings:

- Survey: Panel members were aware that there were gaps in their knowledge and therefore created a survey to reach a wider range of users (for example, runners, parents with young children / pushchairs, people with disabilities) and was used in the following ways

- Panel members took copies to site and interviewed other users using the survey format
- Panel members placed flyers under car windscreens in the car park, directing users to the online version of the survey
- Website: key questions about the site were posted in the Nene Valley NIA interactive website ([www.nenevalleynia.org](http://www.nenevalleynia.org)).
- Guided walk: a guided walk around the site was planned as part of a wider events programme in Northamptonshire. This was led by the Reserves Manager and volunteers from the Panel accompanied her, taking the opportunity to explain about the work of the group and finding out the perspective of the walk participants about the site. At the same time the facilitator and a colleague remained in the car park, talking to visitors about their use of the site.

This work fed into the creation of a detailed action plan that included a vision for the site, plus recommendations for a wide range of management activities, with analysis of their relative importance and ease of implementation. The plan was presented to the NIA Board on 12<sup>th</sup> December 2014. At this meeting NIA members expressed their gratitude for the work done by Panel members; and committed to exploring the action plan in more detail, including seeking funds for those activities that would require investment.

#### **Box 2: The agreed vision – Summer Leys and Mary’s Lake**

*In 2024 Summer Leys will be managed primarily for its nature conservation value. It will retain its high ecological value and maintain the protected status.*

*Use by the public will be managed and will:*

- ensure good access for people with disabilities
- provide access for the public along the Public Rights of Way and the permissive paths
- provide information to users about the value of the site and recommended behaviours
- engage its users.

*The Wildlife Trust management plan will be in place that includes detail about how these purposes are managed. This management plan will sit within a strategic level zoning plan for this section of the valley, so each site can be managed for its primary purpose/s.*

This round of Community Panels was again very successful. Levels of participation by members of the public were consistently high, and did not decline as the process progressed. This suggests that their interest was maintained throughout and their level of commitment to both the public dialogue process and the site itself was considerably high. The deliberation that took place was considered and detailed. Although there was a sense of “no major issues” among Panel members at the start, they undertook a forensic analysis of the site’s current situation in order to assess how it could achieve the vision they had drafted, and as a result created what is a detailed and insightful action plan.

### **What is the role of the NIA in the project?**

This was an NIA driven project. Specifically the NIA:

- Brought together organisations from the NIA’s planning group<sup>2</sup> (NE, RSPB, NWT and RNRP) including the RSPB’s NIA Board member as the link person between the two NIA structures.

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<sup>2</sup> Nene Valley NIA has planning groups for each of its five objectives, and the public dialogue work had been developed by the group responsible for objective 2 (‘enhance public awareness, access and benefits of the NIA

- Bid for and coordinated the funding that was provided by from Natural England and Sciencewise, for public dialogue projects developed by the 12 NIA partnerships.
- Recommendations produced by the Panels were reported to and endorsed by the NIA Board. The NIA group which is coordinating further funding bids to facilitate work beyond March 2015 is taking these recommendations into account in project development.

Other NIA partner roles were as follows.

- Natural England attended Panel meetings and provided technical expertise and background information between meetings.
- The Wildlife Trust helped with recruitment of Panel members, including an on-site presence. The Reserve Manager attended the Summer Leys and Mary’s Lake Panel.
- River Nene Regional Park helped with recruitment and played a crucial role in booking meeting venues. They also provided technical expertise, background information between meetings and support facilitation at meetings.
- River Nene Regional Park’s Chief Executive acted as a ‘sounding board’ for the facilitator on the detailed design of individual dialogue sessions.
- The RSPB attended meetings and provided technical expertise and background information between meetings. They also paid for the venues for the Summer Leys and Mary’s Lake Panel.

The project was felt to be a good example of NIA partnership working.

### What are the social and economic wellbeing benefits of this activity

Figure 4 summarises the relevant outputs, outcomes and benefits for this case study as identified by the NIA.

Figure 4 Public dialogue outputs, outcomes and relevant benefits

Outputs	Outcomes	Relevant benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>26 members of the public attended Panel meetings.</b></li> <li>• <b>10 Panel meetings were held, plus one interim meeting.</b></li> <li>• <b>Action plans and vision documents produced for 2 sites.</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A body of people interested in a continuing involvement in managing the two sites.</li> <li>• Outline action plans and visions to guide the ongoing work on the sites.</li> <li>• Greater awareness among members of the public about the ecological value of the sites and the real and potential impact of recreational disturbance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Members of the public have been engaged in deliberation and decision making on complex technical / ecological issues – they have brought a new dimension to site management and presented options that the lead organisations had not considered.</li> </ul>

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in a sustainable and sympathetic way, while ensuring that the designated sites at the core remain in favourable condition’).

### *Economic*

Northampton Washland - it is a primary purpose of the vision that any changes do not impact negatively on the tenant farmer's income.

### *Education and ecological knowledge*

Members of the general public have contributed their knowledge of the site, learned from one another, and have benefited from the technical expertise of key NIA partners. Technical experts have learned from Panel members with considerable day to day knowledge of the sites and their uses.

### *Social development and connections*

The majority of Panel members for both sites have requested a continuing involvement. The RSPB has offered to help the Washland Panel establish a 'Friends of' group, and there is interest at Summer Leys to re-start the lapsed group.

At the Washland the tenant farmer now has good connections with a number of members of the public who will hopefully act as the 'eyes and ears' of the site on his behalf when he is not present. The Wildlife Trust Reserves Manager now has similar links with a large number of people who have expressed a commitment to Summer Leys.

The vision developed by the groups mean that it is more likely that existing uses (such as recreation and bird-watching) can continue and co-exist.

### *Spiritual, cultural and aesthetic*

The vision statements ensure that the value of the sites to various user groups is maintained.

## **Lessons learnt**

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### **What worked well?**

The level of debate and engagement during the Panel meetings was felt to be of a very high standard. Everyone attending demonstrated a willingness to share their own knowledge, as well as learn from others. Participants were enabled through skilled facilitation to engage with complex technical issues, and to produce clear thinking and constructive deliberation.

Being able to use the technical knowledge and networks of key agencies was key in providing quick turnaround information to the Panel members and at meetings.

Independent, skilled facilitation kept the process on track and delivered what the process set out to do.

### **What challenges has the project experienced and how have these been addressed?**

Recruitment of Panel members took longer than expected – this is a methodology that requires a substantial (unpaid) commitment from members of the public and this will effect recruitment. It is valid within public dialogue processes to make incentive payments to participants, and this is a consideration for the future.

The NIA and partners had to find answers to Panel members' questions very quickly – this worked when those involved in the process could respond; it was harder to achieve quick turnaround from organisations not directly involved in the Panel, such as other NIA partners.

Some Panel members have had a very long involvement with the site in question and are hugely knowledgeable. A very small number however have very fixed positions about how things are and what they want to see, with little tolerance of others' views and experiences. Having an expert



facilitator was critical in managing these individuals and ensuring that they were assets to the process.