

Natural England Board



Meeting: 21
Date: 28 July 2010

Paper No: **NEB PU21 04**

Title: **Natural England Science Advisory Committee (NESAC) Update**

Sponsor: **Tom Tew, Chief Scientist**

1. Background

1.1. The Natural England Science Advisory Committee (NESAC) continues to meet quarterly. It has met twice, in February and July 2010, since the last update to the Board (February 2010).

2. Recommendation

2.1 It is recommended that the Board notes the work of the NESAC to date.

3. NESAC February 2010 meeting

3.1 Attendance: Due to a large number of apologies (10) including two on the day, there were only six NESAC members present, three from the Board and three externals.

3.2 The meeting comprised two sessions: a free-ranging discussion on the future role of NESAC, and a presentation on the systematic review approach to evidence-based decision making.

3.3 Review of NESAC

3.3.1 The purpose of this session was to review what NESAC had achieved so far and to discuss how it can be effective in the future.

3.3.2 The Terms of Reference for NESAC set out three roles - horizon scanning, acting as a sounding board and providing science Quality Assurance.

3.3.3 There was consensus between members that the role of 'sounding board', discussing and improving Board and policy papers, had worked well for Natural England and been interesting for NESAC, with a feeling that they were influential and helpful eg over papers on non-native invasive species, energy, biotechnology, and in 'thematic' discussions eg on HLS targeting.

3.3.4 The view was that the other two roles had been less good. The big picture horizon scanning was agreed to be an important and under-utilised part of the jigsaw. Discussion identified a number of areas where NESAC felt they could contribute, and some will be considered for future meetings.

3.4 Systematic review approach to evidence-based decision making

3.4.1 NESAC also received a presentation from Andrew Pullin from the Centre for Environmental Evidence on the systematic review approach to evidence-based decision making.

3.4.2 NESAC tested the argument that this approach was a central and essential technique in developing our evidence base. They accepted that it was an important tool but just one of many which should be considered by Natural England staff in their evidence work.

4. NESAC July 2010 meeting

4.1 Attendance: there were nine NESAC members present, three from the Board and six externals.

4.2 The meeting discussed topics: biodiversity offsets, the proposed Natural Environment White Paper, and landscape character and NCA objectives.

4.3 Biodiversity offsets

4.3.1 The purpose of this session was to identify what evidence is needed to make the system of biodiversity offsets work in this country to the benefit of the natural environment.

4.3.2 NESAC members had some reservations over the concept of biodiversity offsets, but acknowledged that the Government is pushing them forward and Natural England has to respond appropriately.

4.3.3 Members suggested that the offsets concept should be extended beyond biodiversity. It is crucial when putting values on land to consider all the features and services.

4.3.4 Members saw the benefits of biodiversity offsets to achieve beneficial management of good quality non-protected land. They also recognised how significant net gain could be achieved if the offsets were collected together into something meaningful ecologically.

4.3.5 To avoid perverse outcomes we should articulate exactly what we mean by the key terms, eg no net loss.

4.3.6 NESAC noted the dilemma between establishing an effective accreditation system and minimising bureaucracy (a fundamental consideration for Government).

4.4 Proposed Natural Environment White Paper

4.4.1 This discussion provided NESAC with an opportunity to shape Natural England's input to Defra on the shape of the forthcoming consultation paper that will lead to the Natural Environment White Paper proper.

4.4.2 NESAC advised that Natural England should highlight, and provide evidence for, the following issues:

- the need to sustain the integrity of the natural environment in order to deliver ecosystem services;
- the ecosystem approach, optimising the mix of services and having a coherent package of advice, regulation, payments and markets;
- the need for a major steer on CAP reform;
- developing responsibilities and rights as citizens as the basis for effective local action;
- an emphasis on demographic change and the resulting changes in needs from the environment (public health, leisure, continued growth in demand for food, water etc);
- the role of environmental infrastructure as a platform for sustainable, green, resilient (to climate change and changes in economic availability of natural resources) economic development and growth.

4.5 Landscape character and NCA objectives

- 4.5.1 This discussion explored how Natural England is developing the use of landscape as a spatial framework for all of its work.
- 4.5.2 NESAC welcomed the concept of landscape character as a way of presenting a complex array of information about the natural environment (landscape, biodiversity, geodiversity, historic environment, people and access, climate change, ecosystem services). They also appreciated the value of stacking layers of information to facilitate analysis and interrogation.
- 4.5.3 The NCA objectives will be a valuable tool in providing the evidence to inform decisions affecting the natural environment, especially at the local level.
- 4.5.4 NESAC noted there is variation in the availability and quality of data, being particularly poor for ecosystem services. They were nervous that this could result in some decisions being based on inadequate data or simplistic statements. Natural England should target its resources on filling the priority evidence gaps.
- 4.5.5 NESAC strongly supported the further development of NCA objectives and the use of landscape as a unifying spatial framework for Natural England's work.

5. Future meetings

- 5.1. The remaining meetings for 2010 are scheduled for 19 October (possible stakeholder event) and 1 December.