

LIFE Natura 2000 Programme for Wales

Frequently Asked Questions

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What is Natura 2000?

Natura 2000 (or N2K) sites are European protected wildlife sites designated under the Habitats and Birds Directive – better known as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Areas (SPA). They exist to provide a high level of protection to 69 species and 55 habitats which are threatened internationally.

Why is Natura 2000 important?

The Natura 2000 network is a cornerstone of nature conservation in Europe. Protected habitats range from ancient oak woodlands, upland heathland, sand dunes, rivers and lakes as well as estuaries, coastal habitats and the open sea. Iconic species like otter, bottlenose dolphin and grey seal, are protected alongside more obscure plants such as petalwort and unobtrusive species like whorl snails. A wide range of well known bird species are included, both resident and migratory, such as chough, hen harrier, curlew and merlin.

Not only are these species and habitats protected, but if the sites are well managed, the whole ecosystem of which they are part will also be healthy and robust and will ensure that the other wildlife which it supports will also be conserved.

Natura 2000 sites also deliver a wealth of benefits to the people of Wales. They are not, in most cases, nature reserves but living landscapes with farms, forestry enterprises or fisheries which contribute to the Welsh economy. They show us nature at its best and are appreciated by millions of visitors every year, supporting the tourist industry and providing the opportunity for pleasure, relaxation and outdoor exercise which boosts health and wellbeing. They also provide essential life support services for all of us, such as purifying our drinking water and storing carbon.

What is the LIFE Natura 2000 Programme?

It is a 28 month long project co-funded by the EU LIFE grant scheme and run by Natural Resources Wales to develop a programme, or forward plan, for the management and restoration of Natura 2000 sites in Wales.

What is the purpose of the project?

The aim is to make significant progress towards bringing all designated habitats and species on Natura 2000 sites in Wales into favourable condition, to ensure that they are safeguarded for the future. We will do this by identifying pressures that affect the wellbeing of the designated habitats and species and determine all actions which are needed to address them. This will include prioritising and costing actions and identifying available funding. This information will be drawn together to create a strategic programme for Wales, which will be implemented as soon as possible.

What will the project produce?

The project will produce action plans for all Natura 2000 sites in Wales (and some additional ones for groups of sites or themes) and an agreed, strategic programme for the country. We will also pull together an evidence base of data to inform this work, in particular, on issues and risks to Natura habitats and species and the value of existing and new management mechanisms. A major study will look at existing and potential new sources of funding. In addition, a database (most likely the Special Sites Actions Database) will be developed to hold the information and make it accessible to internal and external users.

What are the benefits?

The primary benefit is that, for the first time, the programme will develop a strategic approach to managing Natura 2000 sites and features in Wales. It will look at the whole network together - those at sea and on land, upland and lowland - and identify overall issues, requirements, costs and priorities. This will allow decision-makers to allocate funds, time and other resources in a coherent, targeted manner rather than on an ad hoc basis.

Importantly the programme will be developed with input from a wide range of organisations involved in Natura 2000 management. This will allow us to pool expertise and agree solutions collectively as well as ensuring that the final programme is widely supported, and in a state where it can be implemented as soon as possible.

The programme will calculate the cost of saving our key wildlife assets (on a local and national level) allowing us to plan more effectively. It will also be used to help access millions of pounds from existing and new grant schemes and other funding sources, and help ensure that Natura 2000 needs are recognised and supported by sources of funding which have not historically funded wildlife conservation. This has the potential to provide a boost to local economies as well as the environment by bringing new cash into Wales.

To achieve this we will have to provide evidence to decision-makers (including grant-holders) of the value of Natura 2000 – not just in terms of wildlife, but what they can provide to the people of Wales. These include services like carbon storage, cleaner water, reduced flood risk, natural sea defences, green jobs, opportunities for local enterprise, better visitor attractions and more productive fisheries.

Does the Programme just cover Natura 2000 sites on land?

No, the Programme covers all Natura 2000 sites; terrestrial, freshwater and marine.

How many staff members are involved?

There is a team of seven staff who work exclusively on the LIFE Natura 2000 Programme. However, many others involved in the conservation and management of Natura 2000 sites will contribute as the programme progresses.

Will NRW be dictating how the sites will be managed?

The aim of the project is to bring key stakeholders together to identify where management is necessary and work out mutually acceptable solutions for bringing designated species and habitats into favourable condition. This will include representatives of site owners and managers, farming and fisheries, recreational users, conservationists, regulators, policy makers and others in the public sector. Engagement from partners is vital so that they can input into and agree the process and be able and willing to deliver the plans on the ground in the near future.

Are new protected areas being designated as part of the project or will there be further restrictions imposed on landowners and users?

The project is concerned with the management of existing sites, rather than designating new ones. The UK already has a legal responsibility to ensure that all Natura 2000 sites are managed favourably, and this project will make progress towards achieving that. Part of the work will look at new and creative ways of managing the sites in order to meet the needs of the users as well as the wildlife of the site.

Will the project involve practical action on the ground? Surely this is the priority right now.

This project itself will not be delivering practical work on the ground, however, it will identify what work is required on Natura 2000 sites and enable practical activities to take place – from simple practical management tasks to large-scale projects involving several sites. These should begin by 2014, if not before. The project staff will be working with stakeholders to agree, plan and prepare for this. Time invested in early planning stages can pay back later with more successful practical outcomes. Actions will be prioritised so that effort can be targeted where the need is greatest and time will also be invested in identifying sources of funding to ensure the plans will become reality.

Why did NRW apply for European funding for this project at this time?

The European Commission encouraged member states to apply for LIFE funding to produce Natura 2000 programmes in order to demonstrate national priorities for Natura 2000 and help the process of integrating these needs into the allocation of EU funding. This includes the major grant schemes such as the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development or

the European Fisheries Fund, which have large budgets but historically have rarely been used to support nature conservation.

Wales also failed to meet targets set by the Welsh Government to have 90% of international sites in favourable condition by 2010. This highlighted the need for a new approach and renewed efforts to manage and restore Natura 2000 sites.

Are the LIFE Natura 2000 Programme and the Prioritised Action Framework the same thing?

The Prioritised Action Framework (PAF) for Wales is a separate initiative, but there are close links between the two. The Wales PAF will form part of a UK document which will be submitted to the EU to highlight major Natura 2000 issues and help determine priorities for their main funding streams.

The first PAF will be a relatively brief overview however, the results of the LIFE Natura 2000 Programme will be used to inform and elaborate future versions of the PAF. The programme will provide more detail, a strong evidence base and stakeholder consensus. Outputs of the programme will be made fully compatible with the needs of the PAF.

Will individual landowners, farmers and fishermen be involved?

Because we are working on a Wales-wide scale, it may not be possible to consult all landowners, occupiers and users before plans are made. However, we will be in close contact with representative organisations such as farmers unions, associations and regional partnerships at all stages. Any activity included in an action plan or the programme should only be regarded as a proposal, which would only be implemented following full consultation with all relevant owners, occupiers and users at a local level.

A lot of information has already been produced on the management of Natura 2000 sites.

Why is this being repeated?

The project's role will be to collate existing data, information and research rather than creating (or re-creating) it from scratch. In many cases, the existing information has been produced by different organisations, for specific purposes and often just for one sector e.g. only for marine features. Therefore, the aim of the project is to source, collate and amalgamate such material to give a comprehensive picture for all sites and features across Wales.

There are Management Plans in place for all Natura 2000 sites already. Aren't you just reinventing the wheel by writing Action Plans?

Action plans are different from Management Plans. Standard Natura 2000 Management Plans describe the features of interest on a site, lay out the conservation aims and

objectives, and describe what should be done to achieve them. Action plans take the process a step-forward by indicating what can be realistically be delivered by 2020. They will include practical details, such as area of work required, costs, timetables, who will deliver the work, priorities, funding sources etc, none of which are found in standard Management Plans. Up-to-date Management Plans are necessary to inform the Action Plans and the two documents should be used together.

Can the Action Plans include actions outside site boundaries?

Yes, providing the action will improve the condition of a feature on a site, for example, by reducing pollution from an upstream point source or improving ecological connectivity between two sites.

Why will you be building a new database when we already have the Actions Database?

The aim isn't to create a new database but develop the existing Actions Database, if at all possible. We intend to improve it so that it can hold new data collected as part of the project and make that accessible to partners via the extranet. It will also need to be able to carry out effective searches, queries and analysis to help supply the necessary information needed by policy-makers, operational planners, grant schemes etc.

What is the difference between the Special Sites Programme and the LIFE Natura 2000 Programme?

The LIFE Natura 2000 Programme was devised by the SSP and will work alongside the SSP to supplement its ongoing work. The SSP is a long term project which aims to bring all protected wildlife sites in Wales into a favourable condition, through a variety of means but particularly by concentrating on enabling current action on the ground. The LIFE Natura 2000 Programme will focus on Natura 2000 sites only and will run only until the end of December 2014. The focus is on creating a forward plan for delivering actions to manage and restore sites during the 2014-20 period.

How has the formation of Natural Resources Wales affected the project?

On the 01 April 2013, Natural Resources Wales took over the functions previously carried out by the Countryside Council for Wales and Forestry Commission Wales, the devolved functions of Environment Agency Wales and some functions previously carried out within the Welsh Government. Because the LIFE Natura 2000 Programme is funded by the EU LIFE grant scheme, we are contractually obliged to deliver the outputs of the project by the end of 2014, and this commitment has been transferred to NRW without any significant change. NRW will encourage closer working and sharing of ideas between staff involved in Natura 2000 management, who were originally in the three separate organisations and so will bring significant benefits. There may be a period of adjustment as systems are brought together

or new arrangements are established, but this has been planned for and the project will work flexibly to avoid setbacks because of this.

Why is Wales spending so much money on wildlife sites when the current economic climate means there are so many more important priorities?

Well managed wildlife sites generate economic gains well beyond the investment made in them; through tourism, sustainable agriculture and fisheries and life-support services like improved water quality, flood regulation and carbon storage.

Half of the LIFE Natura 2000 project funding has come from the European Union LIFE scheme, so this has already brought extra investment into the Welsh economy. One of the key aims of the project is to help access a much greater degree of funding for the management of wildlife sites. This could result in millions of pounds of extra cash for conservation work, boosting local economies by supporting green jobs and creating work for local businesses.

Will partners and stakeholders be able to claim some of the LIFE funds to compensate for the time and/or expenses which they contribute?

Unfortunately, partners and stakeholders cannot claim for time or expenses that they incur while participating in the project. However, we hope that many stakeholders will find engagement with the project worthwhile for their organisation and help them meet some of their own objectives.

Do partners and stakeholders have to log their time to be counted as match funding?

No, only the project team's time is chargeable to the LIFE funds. We cannot claim grant aid for time contributed by other NRW staff, external partners or stakeholders, so there is no need to log your time.

How do I find out more about the project? Can I get involved?

Find out more by going to our website (<http://naturalresourceswales.gov.uk/about-us/our-projects/lifenatura-2000-programme-for-wales/>) or by contacting one of the project team on 01248 385797.

Organisations in Wales which have an interest in Natura 2000 can contribute information, ideas and views and get involved in the creation of the action plans and the programme by attending workshops which will take place around Wales in 2013 and 2014. There is also a mailing list which will provide newsletters and other updates.

LIFE N2K Wales: LIFE11 NAT/UK/385

Supported by LIFE, a financial instrument of the European Community.