

Securing a healthy natural environment:

An action plan for embedding an ecosystems approach



Executive Summary

The natural environment provides a wide range of goods and services – ‘ecosystem services’ – that underpin human health, wellbeing and prosperity. In order to improve our effectiveness at securing a healthy natural environment, Defra is committed to developing a more strategic approach and a more integrated framework for policy-making and delivery. The new natural environment Public Service Agreement sets out a clear vision and, for the first time, recognises that this is a shared responsibility across Government. To help us deliver the Public Service Agreement, we are now taking further steps to embed an ecosystems approach in policy-making and delivery, based on a number of core principles:

- taking a more holistic approach to policy-making and delivery, with the focus on maintaining healthy ecosystems and ecosystem services
- ensuring that the value of ecosystem services is fully reflected in decision-making
- ensuring environmental limits are respected in the context of sustainable development, taking into account ecosystem functioning
- taking decisions at the appropriate spatial scale while recognising the cumulative impacts of decisions
- promoting adaptive management of the natural environment to respond to changing pressures, including climate change.

Moving towards an ecosystems approach will deliver a number of important benefits:

- more effective delivery of our environmental outcomes
- better-informed decisions that take full account of environmental impacts, helping us to achieve sustainable development
- better prioritisation and more efficient use of our resources
- more effective communications and greater awareness of the value of the natural environment and ecosystem services.

Defra has worked with many of our key partners and stakeholders, including Natural England and the Environment Agency, to agree this Action Plan to drive the adoption of an ecosystems approach. The Action Plan identifies 37 actions (listed in Annex 1) that will be delivered mainly over the next two years and which represent an ambitious and wide-ranging agenda for Defra, the Defra network and our partners. As part of this agenda, we have identified a number of clear **priority areas for action** that will be fundamental to our success and to securing wider engagement at the national, regional and local levels:

Priority area 1: Promoting joined-up working within Defra and the Defra network to deliver environmental outcomes more effectively

- Defra will embed the principles of an ecosystems approach in its standard policy-making procedures **[A1]**.
- Natural England, the Environment Agency, the Forestry Commission and the Government Offices will work together to influence regional strategies, including by baselining key pressures **[A11]**.

Priority area 2: Identifying opportunities for mainstreaming an ecosystems approach

- Defra will review the scope for adapting existing policy and project appraisal tools to incorporate principles of an ecosystems approach **[A10]**.
- The Department for Communities and Local Government and Defra will work together to influence the design of eco-towns to maximise delivery of ecosystem services **[A17]**.

Priority area 3: Using case studies that demonstrate the benefits of taking an ecosystems approach

- A project to look at the wider benefits of peat conservation **[A4c]**.
- A review of the air quality policy on ammonia **[A4a]**.
- A scoping study to identify the wider benefits of Environmental Stewardship **[A4b]**.

Priority area 4: Developing ways of valuing ecosystem services

- Defra and the Defra network will pilot the valuation of ecosystem services in a range of policy areas, including valuing the benefits of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan and impact assessment for the Marine Bill. **[A15]**.
- The Department for Transport will work with Defra on a long-term strategy for the development of environmental valuation in transport appraisal, including the valuation of ecosystem services **[A16]**.
- Defra and the Defra network will develop a benefits transfer strategy to facilitate the valuation of ecosystem services **[A18]**.

Priority area 5: Developing a robust evidence base

- Defra and the Defra network will further articulate the evidence needs for an ecosystems approach, identify priorities and improve the strategic co-ordination of research and development **[A27]**.
- Defra and the Defra network will develop a strategy for the convergence of indicators and targets, consistent with an ecosystems approach **[A21]**.

The Action Plan is structured around a number of themes that set out the background to the approach and the rationale for the suggested actions. It is intended to provide policy-makers, economists and scientists with a clear overview of the principles and benefits of an ecosystems approach and to show how key players will work together to take this agenda forward.