

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Criteria for Local Authorities, Local Nature Partnerships and others to apply when identifying Nature Improvement Areas

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In the Natural Environment White Paper, we set out our vision for Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) to be created wherever the opportunities or benefits are greatest, driven by the knowledge and vision of local partners. These landscape-scale initiatives aim to ensure that land is used sustainably to achieve multiple benefits for people, wildlife and the local economy. It is not the intention of NIAs to stifle sustainable development within the area; economic development within an NIA will remain vital, and many development proposals will have no or minimal impacts on the overall integrity or objectives of the NIA.

We have set out a role for Local Nature Partnerships to work with and support the 12 Government-funded NIAs as well as to help establish new, locally determined NIAs. It is for Local Planning Authorities to decide whether and how to recognise an NIA in their local plans¹. The following criteria are intended to help Local Authorities, Local Nature Partnerships and other local partnerships identify the locally determined NIAs.

What are Nature Improvement Areas?

Nature Improvement Areas are large (in the region of 10,000-50,000 hectares), discrete areas that, by taking a landscape-scale approach, will deliver a step change in nature conservation, where a local partnership has a shared vision for their natural environment. The partnership will plan and deliver significant improvements for wildlife and people through the sustainable use of natural resources, restoring and creating wildlife habitats, connecting local sites and joining up local action. The partnership will be able to demonstrate measurable improvements – the “step-change” - and commit to sharing information about their achievements.

What are the characteristics of Nature Improvement Areas?

Although the characteristics of NIAs will vary across the country according to what is possible and what is needed, these will be places where:

- Opportunities to deliver ecological networks, both in terms of large area and scale and valuable benefits to wildlife and people, are particularly high, taking account of relevant evidence, for example from biodiversity opportunity maps²;

¹ The National Planning Policy Framework

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/planningandbuilding/pdf/2115939.pdf> states that Local Plans should, crucially, contain a clear strategy for enhancing the natural, built and historic environment, and supporting Nature Improvement Areas where they have been identified.

² <http://www.biodiversityplanningtoolkit.com/>

- A shared vision for the natural environment exists among a wide partnership of local people, including statutory and voluntary sectors;
- Significant improvements to the ecological network can be achieved over large areas by enlarging and enhancing existing wildlife sites, improving ecological connectivity and/or creating new sites;
- The surrounding land use can be better integrated with valued landscapes and action to restore wildlife habitats and underpinning natural processes, helping to adapt to climate change impacts;
- Benefits to urban areas and communities can be achieved and, where appropriate, NIAs may contain urban areas as part of an enhanced ecological network;
- “Win-win” opportunities are identified and have the potential to be exploited to the full to derive multiple benefits, for example with benefits for the water environment and Water Framework Directive objectives, flood and coastal erosion risk management and the low-carbon economy;
- There are opportunities to inspire people through an enhanced experience of the outside world.

What components of an ecological network should Nature Improvement Areas contain?

NIAs should contain all these components of an ecological network³:

- Core areas, especially existing wildlife sites (National Nature Reserves, Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Local Nature Reserves, Local Wildlife Sites, and other semi-natural areas of high ecological quality);
- Corridors and stepping stones;
- Restoration areas, where priority habitats are created to provide (in time) more core areas;
- Buffer zones, that reduce pressures on core areas;
- Surrounding land that is sustainably managed, including for food production, in a wildlife friendly way.

How should Nature Improvement Areas be recognised?

Decisions to recognise an NIA should be made on a partnership basis, with the local groups or individuals who have developed the NIA and the farmers and landowners concerned, taking account of the best available evidence including, where relevant,

³ Components of an ecological network are set out in the [Making Space for Nature Review](#).

National Character Area profiles and biodiversity opportunity maps. Full details of Nature Improvement Area criteria can be found on Natural England's [website](#). This also includes the details of the monitoring and evaluation framework and on-line reporting system that all NIA partnerships should use in order to demonstrate measurable improvements and to share their information with others. This is designed to be a light touch framework and process enabling Defra and NE to undertake an evaluation of the information submitted by NIA partnerships and publish the results.

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