

# NENE VALLEY

Nature • Improvement • Area  
connecting people and nature

# Nene Valley

Nature Improvement Area

Achieving for the people,  
places, and economy of  
Northamptonshire and  
Cambridgeshire



# Connecting people and nature in the Nene Valley

*“Nature Improvement Areas provide one of the best opportunities in years to turn around the declines we are seeing in the natural world around us.”*

- Professor Sir John Lawton

The ‘Making Space for Nature’ review in 2010, chaired by Sir John Lawton, concluded that England’s collection of protected wildlife sites was not adequate to prevent the decline in biodiversity. **60% of species are declining and 10% are at risk of extinction.** The review endorsed a landscape scale approach to conservation.



Experiencing nature in the Nene Park © Chris Porsz

## Nature Improvement Areas

Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) were introduced by the first Natural Environment White Paper for 20 years ‘The Natural Choice’. The Government established 12 NIAs as a key mechanism for restoring the natural environment to benefit people and wildlife. These were established through a national competition and allocated £7.5 million funding. The Nene Valley NIA partnership was formed in 2011 and as one of the successful 12, received £714,469 to deliver a 3 year plan. Find out more at:

[www.nenevalleynia.org](http://www.nenevalleynia.org)

The NIA has set in motion a positive attitude towards nature conservation, as the basis for a healthy, wealthy society. In three years we have achieved a lot, but not enough to secure the long term future of the Nene Valley. We have a vision for a wildlife rich environment that is an asset to local people and businesses.

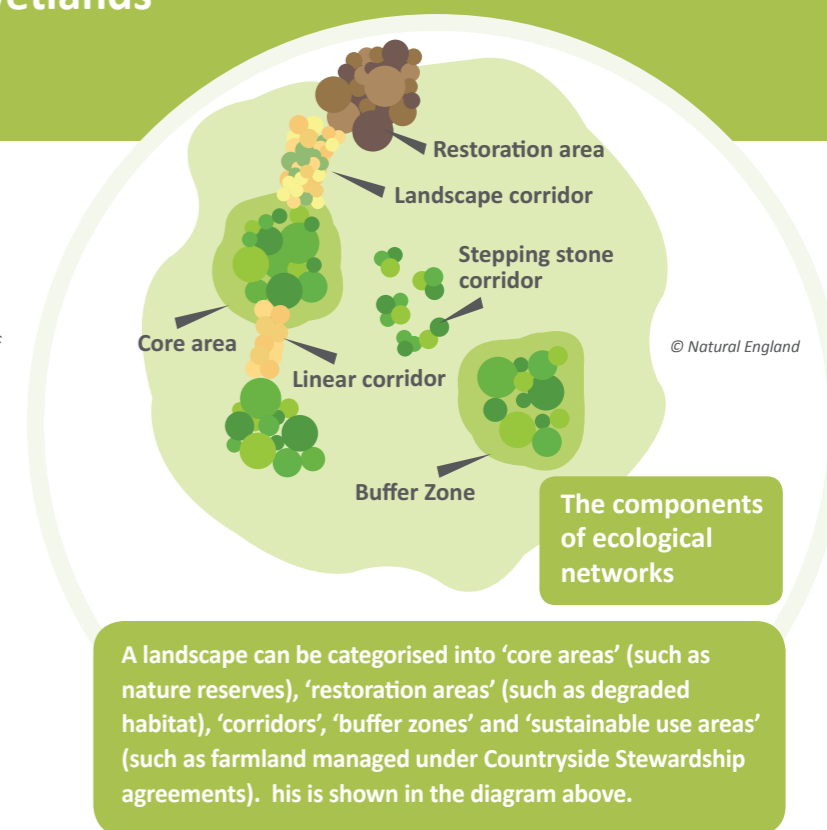
Further investment is needed to maintain the momentum: To create more habitats for wildlife, improve access to the countryside, raise awareness among local residents, and maximise the benefits that nature provides to us.

# What is the Nene Valley NIA?

The Nene Valley NIA covers an area of 41,000 hectares running through the heart of Northamptonshire to the eastern fringes of Peterborough. It includes the River Nene and its tributaries, gravel pits, reservoirs, wetlands and farmland.

Local organisations came together with a shared vision for the natural environment. This partnership is making big improvements for wildlife and people through careful use of natural resources, creating wildlife habitats and linking them together, and joining up local action.

The river Nene runs through a landscape hugely altered by man. Remaining fragments of wildlife habitats like wildflower meadows, woodlands and wetlands need to be protected, managed better, enlarged, and connected up. All of this needs to be surrounded by a sustainably managed landscape of farmland, towns and villages.



*“The Nene Valley is a very special part of Northamptonshire so to be selected as a Nature Improvement Area is wonderful news for the county. The valley is somewhere where human activity takes place in a stunning natural environment so it is essential that a balance is maintained and we achieve a sustainable way of working together.”*

- Cllr Ben Smith, Northamptonshire County Council cabinet member for environment, speaking about the announcement of the NIA in 2012.



# Our vision for the Nene Valley...

Sustainable developments complement the landscape. New ponds and meadows collect water runoff and enhance important wildlife sites.

Long-distance cycleways connect communities along the valley and provide new recreational opportunities.

Water quality is improved by keeping grazing animals away from the river bank, and trees help to provide habitats for insects and fish in the river.

Backwaters provide vital spawning and refuge habitat for fish.

Access is well managed to ensure visitors get a great experience without disturbing the wildlife they have come to see.

Wildflower field margins and well-maintained hedgerows soak up water, collect loose soil and absorb pollutants before they reach the river.

Fish and eels are able to move upstream to find places to breed and develop thanks to improvements to weirs.

River meanders create shallow, fast flowing riffles and slow, deep pools which provide a rich variety of habitats.

The Nene is navigable downstream from Northampton and is a popular way to explore the Nene Valley by canoe or boat.

Floodplain hay meadows are full of wildflowers and are a haven for pollinating insects like butterflies and bees.

Many species of fish lay their eggs on clean gravel on the riverbed.

Gravel pits and surrounding wetlands support large numbers of wading birds and waterfowl.

Plants growing on the riverbed and bank provide food and cover for fish and invertebrates

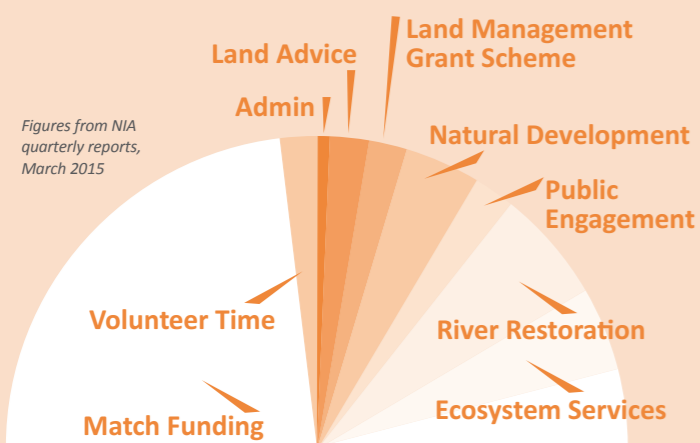
This project has been supported by Defra, DCLG, Environment Agency, Forestry Commission and Natural England.





# £4.50 brought in for every £1 invested by Defra

The NIA has been great value for money. Over three years £3.3 million was invested into the Nene Valley via the NIA. There are over 20 partners, representing nature conservation, local authorities, further education, community engagement, and the private sector. The funding from Defra secured 7 jobs in 4 different organisations from 2012-2015, and supported others through grants to deliver contract work.



The money invested into nature in the Nene Valley should bring more income to the area from tourism and recreation, and may increase house prices and encourage new businesses to locate here. It will also help to secure the future of agriculture by supporting essential pollinating insects and protecting valuable soils.



Proposed site plan—Rushden Lakes includes a visitor centre in the Nene Valley. © HPW/LXB

## Attracting Investment

The Rushden Lakes development is an example of how the natural setting of the Nene Valley can attract investment. By clarifying planning and policy the work of the NIA has helped to ensure swift delivery of future high quality development that will benefit local areas.

***“The unique location of Rushden Lakes means that it will be much more than just a retail park; it will be a visitor destination. We have incorporated the wildlife interest of the lakes into the scheme and secured the future of this area as accessible green space for many generations to come.”***

- Jon McCarthy, LXB Properties

# Communities engaged in the future of their area

## World Class Wildlife

The gravel pits between Northampton and Thrapston are designated as a Special Protection Area; one of only 5 in the East Midlands. This designation recognises the value of the area to migratory wetland birds across Europe, alongside sites such as the North Norfolk Coast and the Camargue. The site is also nationally important for breeding wetland birds. Surveys of breeding birds in 2003 and 2013 reveal declines in a number of iconic species such as kingfisher, heron and cuckoo.

## At risk

The birdlife that is found in the Nene Valley is very vulnerable to disturbance. If birds are disturbed by people, their dogs, or other activities, while they are feeding or resting, it causes them significant harm. Maintaining habitats in good condition is also vital to maintain the bird populations which depend on the Nene Valley.

## The solutions

Making regular site users aware of the harm they can cause is often enough to resolve disturbance issues. In cases where this is not effective, barriers such as fences and ditches may be needed. This requires investment in community engagement and physical work on sites.

The NIA partners secured additional support, through Sciencewise, to involve local communities in decision making. Two ‘Community Panels’ were established, one in Northampton and the other near Wollaston. They looked at issues relating to access and future management of their nearby nature reserves in the Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits Special Protection Area.

## Outcomes

The level of debate during the Panel meetings was of a very high standard. Everyone was willing to share their knowledge, as well as learn from others. This led to action plans for each site, with recommendations for a range of management activities. The NIA Project Board has endorsed the action plans and is seeking funding to deliver them.

An interactive website was developed to present information about the NIA and to engage people in dialogue. The website was launched with a popular photographic competition, so is a great source of wonderful images.

[www.nenevalley.org](http://www.nenevalley.org)



Kingfishers have declined significantly in the Nene Valley in the last 10 years

© Matt Lodge

# Nature in the Nene Valley is worth £118.7 million per year

The benefits that people derive from the natural environment are known as ecosystem services. They are critical to our wellbeing and economic prosperity, yet are consistently undervalued in decision making. By identifying, mapping and valuing ecosystem services in the Nene Valley we are improving our understanding of the importance of the natural environment for people and the economy.

## Valuation

We have assessed that ecosystem services in the Nene Valley are worth £118.7M each year. On average, each hectare of land delivers £2,862 of services per year, but some areas deliver much more than others. This assessment includes only a few of the services that we could value; soaking up carbon dioxide, pollination of crops and orchard fruits, and the money spent on recreational visits. The value of all ecosystem services will be considerably higher. Full report available at

[www.nenevalleynia.org/downloads](http://www.nenevalleynia.org/downloads)



Pollination of crops like beans in the Nene Valley is valued at £1.9M per year.

© Jeff Ollerton

## Mapping

We have mapped a range of other ecosystem services on which it is difficult to place a monetary value. This includes local climate regulation, noise regulation, water purification, accessible nature experience, landscape aesthetics, and timber production. Maps have also been produced showing biodiversity: 265,000 species records have been mapped to show us where our wildlife hot spots are.

## Enhancing nature conservation

This information is being used to identify the links between biodiversity and ecosystem services, and locate land which is delivering many different services. From this we can target areas to conserve and areas to manage better, or differently. An introduction to ecosystem services has been written, and by working with local planning authorities, these principles have been embedded into planning policies that will guide planning and development for the next 20 years.



Visitors to the Nene Valley spend an estimated £116.7M per year.

© Carol MacIntyre-Jones

# There are 5 times more visits to observe wildlife than to premiership football matches each year\*

The Nene Valley attracts at least 2.4 million visitors each year. We estimate around 2,884 of these visit the Special Protection Area every day.

Interviews were carried out with 900 visitors to the Nene Valley in Northamptonshire in 2012-13 to find out more about their activities. Some of the main conclusions are:

- Dog walking is the most common activity.
- Most interviewees arrive by car.
- Most visits are under 2 hours.
- The quality of the site is the most common reason for choosing where to visit.
- Most people travel less than 3km for their visit.
- The average route length for dog walkers is 3.1km, for cyclists is 7.3km and for anglers is 0.6km.
- Ferry Meadows at Peterborough is the most visited Country Park in England.
- The busiest area of the SPA is between Higham Ferrers and Irthlingborough, running north to Stanwick Lakes and towards Raunds.
- Other well visited areas are around Summer Leys, the edge of Northampton, and Thrapston.

The full Visitor Access Study can be downloaded:

[www.nenevalleynia.org/downloads](http://www.nenevalleynia.org/downloads)

## Destination Nene Valley

Improving access along the valley by foot, bike, canoe and boat, alongside measures to improve the visitor experience underpins the tourism strategy for the Nene Valley.

The valley is home to world class wildlife, but we need to ensure that this is well known.

Improving cycleways, and sign posting people into and around the valley, without compromising wildlife, are priorities for investment.



Cycling in Nene Park © Chris Porsz

\*This claim was made by Nick Clegg during his speech at the RSPB's State of Nature conference, 2014.

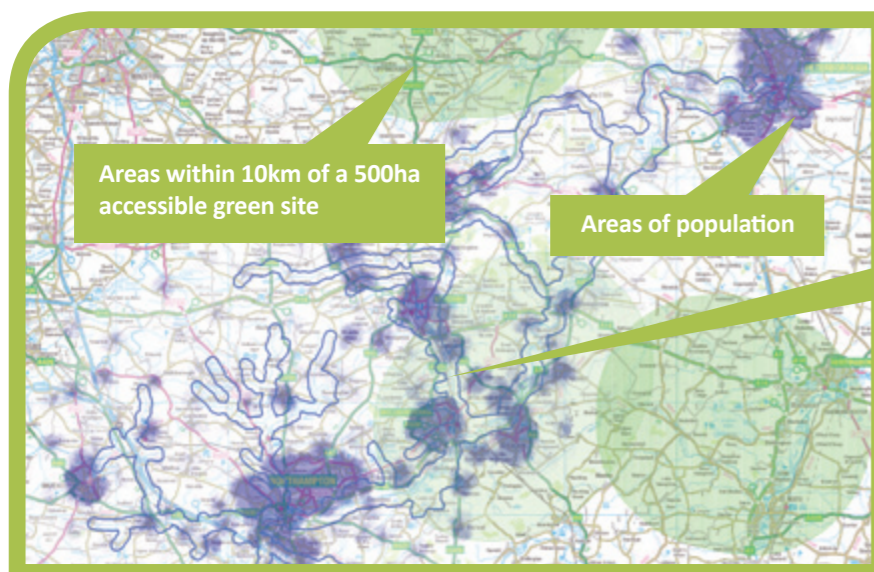


# Access to Green Spaces

Natural England believes that everyone should have access to good quality natural green space near to where they live. This provides a broad range of benefits to people and the quality of their lives.

Access to natural green space in the Nene catchment has been mapped, and shows a significant deficiency. Part of the standard requires everyone to have one accessible site of 500 hectares or more within 10km of home. Currently none of the residents in the Nene Catchment (including Northampton, Peterborough and Corby) have this, as shown on the map below. The full report is available here:

[www.nenevalley.org/downloads](http://www.nenevalley.org/downloads)



By connecting nature reserves, such as those between Ditchford and Stanwick Lakes, we can provide a site over 500ha in the future which will be within 10km of Wellingborough, Kettering, Irthlingborough, Rushden and Higham Ferrers.

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2015 Ordnance Survey

Findings such as this are being incorporated into Green Infrastructure Delivery Plans and Local Development Framework documents in Northamptonshire and Peterborough to support delivery of improved access to natural green spaces.

At the heart of this accessible nature network is the Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits Special Protection Area (SPA). A Supplementary Planning Document for the SPA was produced to help developers and others to meet the legal requirements of the Habitats Regulations when applying for planning permission in or near the Nene Valley.

# 63,000 hours of volunteer time mobilised

*"Getting involved with the Wildlife Trust has affected me quite a lot really. I'm certainly fitter and I've found muscles I'd forgotten I had. It's also given me the courage to go on and take on other things."*

-Amanda Wood, Volunteer at Irthlingborough Lakes and Meadows

Volunteers have been involved in bird surveys, practical work, sowing wildflowers, and leading events. There are opportunities for all kinds of volunteer in the Nene Valley.



Volunteer work party at  
Irthlingborough Lakes and Meadows  
© Wildlife Trust BCN

The National Ecosystem Assessment (2011) gives a detailed account of how the natural world provides us with services that are critical to our wellbeing and prosperity. However it also showed that nature is consistently undervalued in decision making and that many of the services we get from nature are in decline. If we invest in nature we could actually save money elsewhere, while improving the environment and people's health.

The evidence (from the NEA, 2011)

The benefits of spending time outdoors in the natural environment are well proven. The Department of Health suggests that increased access to green space could reduce national healthcare costs by more than £2 billion per year.

- The health benefits of living close to a green space are worth up to £300 per person per year.
- Individuals with easy access to nature are three times as likely to participate in physical activity and, therefore, 40% less likely to become overweight or obese.
- Green exercise results in significant improvements in self esteem and mood. Just seeing nature can be beneficial.

# Wildflowers restored over an area equivalent to 115 football pitches

Wildflower meadows were once a common sight in the Nene Valley. Now they are rare, and declining in most parts of the Country. They still have wide environmental benefits and are enjoyed by many people.

Good relationships with farmers and landowners means that the NIA Land Advisor was able to create and restore 115 hectares of wildflower meadow between 2012 and 2015; bringing this iconic piece of the river valley back to life, to the delight of local residents and wildlife.

Agri-environment schemes are very important to the management of the Nene Valley. In Northamptonshire and Cambridgeshire there are over 800 schemes worth nearly £65m. The NIA Land Advisor brought 1,800ha of land in the Nene Valley into stewardship agreements from 2012-2015. This includes the management and restoration of 214ha of priority habitat including meadow, fen, parkland and wet grassland.

The new 'Countryside Stewardship' scheme opened in 2015. Around £900m will be available for new schemes nationally and the emphasis will be on managing and improving the most important habitats, water quality and environmental networks.

A successful working group was established including land advisors, conservation organisations and farmers. This group has a key role to play in prioritising and coordinating advisory and support services to farmers in the Nene Valley.

More information is available at:

[www.nenevalley.org/project/land-management](http://www.nenevalley.org/project/land-management)



*Oxeye daisies in a hay meadow © Gemma de Gouveia*

# 350 ways to improve the river

75 miles of the river was walked between 2012 and 2015. 350 projects were identified that will help to improve water quality and river habitats, and 4km of river has been enhanced.

## Enhancing urban and modified rivers

The image below on the left is typical of river banks in towns along the river Nene. The river has historically been made wider and straighter and the banks were lined with metal or concrete.

The image below to the right shows the same section of bank, in Peterborough, after work was completed to install coconut fibre rolls, planted with wetland plants, along 500m of the river bank. The new bank blends into the old bank, softens the appearance, and provides habitat for dragonflies, birds and fish. Improving the attractiveness of the river bank will entice more boat users to the area, encourage people to walk along the bank, and the fish that move in will undoubtedly attract anglers.

With support from landowners and sponsors this simple technique can be applied in many other locations to improve the local environment.



© Simon Whitton

## Water Framework Directive

This is EU water legislation whose purpose is to ensure the protection of waterbodies. The objective was to achieve at least 'good status' in all water bodies by 2015. Where this is not possible, measures are identified to improve towards good status by 2021 or 2027. Very little of the Nene or its tributaries currently meet 'good status', some areas are even considered 'poor' because of the amount of phosphate from farmland and sewage treatment works, and low fish numbers. Priorities for the Nene have been identified and included in the Anglian River Basin Management Plan and Nene Catchment Plan.



# A successful approach...

The NIA partnership proved to be effective and efficient. The Project Board took overall decisions and managed the budget and a Working Group was established for each of the five main objectives. The Board included the chair of each Working Group plus representatives from key organisations.

Partnership working will continue in the Nene Valley. The Nene Catchment Partnership and Local Nature Partnerships in Northamptonshire and Cambridgeshire will provide the structure for future activity. Links between these and Local Enterprise Partnerships will be critical for future sustainability.



Dawn on the River Nene, Denford © John Abbott

## Visions for the future

The Northamptonshire LNP's overarching vision is to build a naturally resilient environment that;

- Has healthy, strong ecosystems providing a range of functions which have tangible economic, social and environmental benefits.
- Can accommodate the county's growth aspirations and.
- Prepares Northamptonshire for climate change.

The Vision for the Nene Catchment is that:

The Nene Catchment supports abundant and resilient natural assets and is a desirable place to live, work and relax, characterised by thriving communities and sustainable complementary growth and development.

# We couldn't have done it without...

