



VI.2 End of project evaluation report for the Big Chalk Integrated Project

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I. Executive summary

I.1 Background

The 'Big Chalk' Integrated Project (IP) was an effort to co-ordinate work on delivering better environmental outcomes across the Protected Landscapes on the Central and Southern Chalk Block. The project sought to secure major project funding for the LIFE+ EU Programme.

A project consortium came together to plan and develop a bid and deliver on shared objectives around enhancing water quality, protecting biodiversity assets, influencing and delivering sustainable land-management practices and achieving sustainable growth within environmental limits.

The Brexit vote in June 2016 meant that the chosen route for funding was effectively closed off due to long term nature of the Integrated Programme. It proved difficult to find an alternative way to fund the project as a whole. In spite of this there have been some useful outcomes from the work to develop a viable bid.

I.2 Main Conclusions

- The Integrated Project was complex and ambitious, and ultimately it proved too impossible to find alternative funding for the Programme as a whole.
- There was significant value in applying the Logical Framework approach to this project, and helping to define a clear set of objectives relating to the key challenges facing the chalk landscapes.
- The thinking developed through the planning of this project has consequently been put to good use across a number of different areas of work, and has resulted in the development of a number of other Landscape Scale projects.

- The original idea of delivering a project across a number of protected landscapes proved difficult to deliver on,
- There remains a great opportunity to build upon the joint working between the National Park Authority and the AONB partnerships.

2. The ‘Big Chalk’ Integrated Project (IP)

The project sought to address two major problems that were occurring within the chalk landscapes of the South East of England.

- The natural ecosystems of the chalk landscape in lowland England are damaged and continue to deteriorate, with many of the services that they should be providing dysfunctional.
- The current approach to tackling water quality and improving environmental condition is ineffective, small scale, piecemeal, uncoordinated and based on very few practical examples, resulting in huge water treatment costs rather than dealing with the problems at source.

Through their shared actions the partnership wanted to achieve:-

‘The effective conservation and enhancement of ecosystem services provided by chalk landscapes; in particular, achieving sustainable growth within environmental limits, protecting biodiversity assets such as chalk streams, grasslands and species that are indicators of environmental thresholds’.

2.1 Project purpose

The project sought to demonstrate how integrated land management of chalk river catchments in lowland England could achieve better environmental condition and improved water quality.’

This was to be achieved by:-

- Developing a strategic approach to deliver long-term change and improvement across Organisational and/or geographic barriers or at a large spatial scale within the chalk landscapes.
- Produce a Co-ordinated body of evidence to promote best practice within the chalk landscapes.
- Influence land use change through strategic collaboration to deliver positive environmental benefits at a large spatial scale within the chalk landscapes.
- Apply lessons learned from this new approach across all similar chalk landscapes in England and neighboring European countries.

2.2 Project delivery

Delivery was to be through a partnership approach made up of a consortium of protected landscapes, government agencies and other Delivery partners that came together around these shared objectives. The partnership was led by South Downs National Park Authority and was composed of 9 AONB Partnerships and 2 National Park Authorities, The Environment Agency, Natural England and Forestry Commission as well as a number of research groups, catchment partnerships and River Trusts.

The primary focus of the project was on resolving issues with groundwater quality and declines in the environmental and chemical status of the chalk river catchments. It also sought to influence the wider land management practices that affected the quality of groundwater and surface waters. This included outcomes relating to encouraging more sustainable farming practices, enhancing ecological connectivity for key habitat types, improving the quality and availability of water resources, flood management and the role of trees and woodlands in delivering better water quality.

The project sought greater collaboration between organisations and across the different economic sectors. It hoped to establish better links between those who provide these vital ecosystem benefits and those who require them.

2.3 Project timeline

The idea was first conceived in 2015 as a means to facilitate a joint project between the protected landscapes within the South East region. It was originally intended to form the basis of a bid to a new strand of the LIFE+ Programme that was being developed at the time. These new 'Integrated Projects' (IPs) were to be large-scale spatial projects that dealt with key environmental challenges around climate change risks, water and air quality and resource management. There were to be up to three IPs per member state, with a total potential funding of 330 Million Euros.

In terms of defining the scope of the project, the key deliverables and key outcomes the partnership invested time and effort into working through a 'Logical Framework' planning exercise. This enabled the group to both better understand, and apply a project planning structure to, an extremely complex set of inter-related problems and issues. This process proved invaluable.

The original intention was for the programme to be funded by the EU delivered through the LIFE+ Integrated Project (IP) strand. A first phase Technical Assistance (TA) bid was planned for September 2016 with a view to progressing towards a full application early in 2018. In the light of the vote to exit the European Union taken in June 2016 this option was effectively closed off. As Integrated Projects were intended to run for up to ten years (2019-2030), this took it beyond the period that the UK Government would support EU funded projects or programmes.

Though this was a significant set-back the partnership were keen to continue and to try and capitalise on the planning and development work that had been done to date. It was recognised that the programme and the outcomes that resulted from the LogFrame exercise were essentially a 'road map' to delivering good environmental condition within the Chalk landscapes. There was a shared view that the actions and outcomes that had been identified were still greatly relevant.

A budget allocation was agreed for £10K towards a funding options paper, and a further £15K to fund shared research priorities between the Big Chalk partners. This was to get a sense of how elements of the wider Programme could be taken forward through other funding or delivery mechanisms.

A revised plan was developed to take an element of the Big Chalk forward as a more traditional LIFE+ project bid under the 'Nature' strand. This was being administered by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee. The reworked proposal focused on a narrower element of the Big Chalk Programme, specifically the chalk streams and headwaters. Initial discussions with the Secretariat suggested this approach would be welcomed, and the project would be a good match for their priorities. However, there was a limited applications window for this very final round of European bids. Our initial proposal was submitted in May, with the intention of proceeding to a full bid in September 2017.

A paper was taken to OMT on 27th June 2017 requesting that we re-purpose an element of the budget. As a result the project partners requested that we bring in consultancy support to pull the bid together. We received initial feedback from JNCC on our proposal in early July. This raised a number of issues around the approach, particularly our baseline evidence and metrics for demonstrating success. There was also a concern that another project bid being progressed that had similar objectives. To adequately address these comments required an extensive rewrite of the proposal. There were concerns amongst the partners as to whether these issues could be effectively addressed by the September deadline.

Alongside the LIFE+ bid we sought to twin-track another application to a separate funding source. The RISE 'regional impact' fund had been launched and a call for projects had been issued by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC). This was considered a very good fit for the priorities and actions identified within the wider Big Chalk Programme and perhaps our best opportunity for success in finding appropriate levels of funding. However, it was a requirement of the fund that the bid needed to be led by a research partner. One of the Big Chalk project partners, the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (CEH), was willing to prepare the bid and act as the lead partner. Again, the deadline for outline proposals was mid-September 2017.

Given time constraints, and the work required to complete a viable bid to LIFE+ by September, the partners opted to focus on the RISE fund as the primary bid for funding. An outline proposal was submitted by the deadline of the 19th September 2017. We heard in November 2017 that the outline bid wasn't successful and we consequently we didn't proceed to a full bid. We were invited to re-submit a bid for the next application window, but at this stage the Project Partners felt they had run the course. Further opportunities to fund the Programme as a whole were not available.

3. Key findings

3.1 What went wrong? How could this be addressed in future?

The high level of complexity and ambition for the Programme meant it was difficult to find a suitable funding stream to deliver it in its entirety. Once the opportunity to submit this as a bid to the LIFE+ Integrated Programme it became necessary to focus on discrete elements of the project, such as water quality. This limited the potential of any subsequent funding bids.

High bar in terms of the LIFE+ IP Programme – needed to deliver a Directive in its entirety, this was a challenge to UK government and actually it was seen as too risky to support project bids in case they didn't fully achieve this.

There was significant value in the National Park working within the wider partnership with the regional AONBs, There was great potential within the Programme for shared delivery, which is something that will definitely need to be developed in future. There was some difficulty in maintaining partnership, mainly due to the time commitment required to do the shared planning and collaborative work necessary to sustain momentum with the project development. Some partners were very keen to contribute resource and help, others happy to be a partner body in principle – but less involved,

The Brexit vote in June 2016 meant that the chosen route for funding was effectively closed off due to long term nature of the Integrated Programme. It proved difficult to find an alternative way to fund the project as a whole. As a consequent it became necessary to disaggregate elements of the Programme and look to deliver them in other ways. This led to some tensions within the partnership about which elements should be prioritised and be the focus of revised bids.

Some partners were better resourced to contribute than others, which made it difficult to pull together a comprehensive funding package. The AONBs were willing partners, and keen to contribute to the project, but their budgets were under pressure and the levels of 'non-core' match funding they could identify was limited.

3.2 What went well? What did we learn that we could we use again?

Use of Logical Framework approach was very valuable, the process allowed the partners to work collaboratively and gain a shared understanding of the core problems they were seeking to address. It also allowed us to apply a project structure to an extremely complex, and inter-linked, set of issues. It allowed us to understand the root causes of the issues and plan how these might be realistically be addressed. The production of the 'Objective Tree' and LogFrame itself was extremely useful for defining a long term plan, or 'road map', to dealing with the most pressing environmental issues.

The work produced a very detailed programme of work, which covered all aspects from communication, research and evidence, the design of agri-environment schemes, influencing land management decisions and improved management of key habitats. Though it did not prove possible to find means to fund this programme in its entirety, or to meet our original ambition of working across several protected landscapes, the work has proved very valuable.

The opportunity for the National Park and the AONB partnerships to work together on a set of shared objectives proved hugely valuable. This is something we should aim to learn from and develop further opportunities in the future. Given the challenging funding environment for many of the AONB partnerships this kind of collaborative approach to project delivery and funding will become increasingly relevant.

3.3 The project outcomes, will they be deliverable in the longer term?

The work pre-empted some of the recommendations in Defra's recent 25 year strategy by a full 18 months. It also recognised that the development of new agri-environment schemes would need to raise the bar in terms of what is delivered especially in terms of water quality. In addition, the outputs from the LogFrame exercise have been invaluable in terms of influencing the direction and design of current partnership projects. For example :

- The Changing Chalk HLF partnership project –Includes a Chalk Grassland grazing project to improve the long-term sustainability of chalk-grassland sites that made direct use of the outputs from the LogFrame exercise. This bid was submitted in August 2018.
- Landscapes for water – A project being promoted by Portsmouth Water which is looking at the potential for new woodland planting to protect water sources and provide natural flood management.
- The Channel PES Interreg bid which is looking to pilot 'Payments for Ecosystem Services' (PES) within the Rother Valley and the chalk block that provide Portsmouth Water with its groundwater supply. This applied much of the thinking developed from the LogFrame exercise.
- Brighton CHAMP project (Chalk Management Project) which is aiming to reduce Nitrate levels in aquifers within the Brighton Chalk Block by promoting land management that help improve water quality.

- Bee-Lines – A collaborative project with farmers within the Arun to Adur farm cluster that is seeking to enhance pollination services within the farmed environment. This is looking at delivering environmental benefits over and above the current stewardship schemes, something the Big Chalk Programme also aspired to do.

3.4 Key lessons learned and Recommendations

It is worth spending real time on planning projects – particularly collaboratively so there is shared understanding of the project and the actual problem it is seeking to address. This is time well spent both in terms of developing a sound project plan, but also developing an effective delivery partnership. For large and complex projects this ensures that the project partners are able to convene and plan effectively, and to develop a shared understanding of the issues the project is seeking to address.

Using the Logical Framework approach proved very effective in both understanding and structuring a programme of work. It is time consuming to work through this process in terms of a complex and multiple landscape-scale project, but in this instance it proved the only tool for the job. It has proven reliable in terms of identifying causal links between different problems and in terms of developing a shared understanding with the wider partnership. It also helps to define specific deliverables and how they will be monitored within a project. We have consequently used the tool to great effect to develop other Landscape Scale partnership bids such as the Changing Chalk HLF bid. Used proportionately it remains a useful and effective approach to project planning.

Many of the aspirations and ideas that were developed were about raising the bar for agri-environment schemes. This has proven prescient in terms of the recently published Defra 25 Year Environment Strategy. The work identified many of the shortcomings in the current approach and set out some ideas for improving environmental outcomes in the future. Many of these ideas remain viable and given the focus on piloting and mainstreaming new approaches they can help us inform and influence what might come next.

There remains a great opportunity to further develop joint working between the National Park Authority and the AONB partnerships. The LogFrame exercise highlighted a broad range of issues and objectives that are shared by the Chalk Landscapes. Given the increasingly challenging funding environment for the AONBs this kind of collaborative delivery approach will be necessary. The potential to develop model or core policies, or shared delivery through the Partnership Management Plans is huge. With the current Glover Review in progress we should look for opportunities to apply this approach again.

4. Value for money

For the Integrated Project £150,000 was allocated per year over the period of the project, with match funding and in-kind contributions from the other project partners this would have unlocked a potential 30 Million Euros of funding over the course of the project. It would also have offered the opportunity to align and lever-in other sources of grant funding.

Of the budget allocation of £25,000 the majority of this was handed back, as the partnership chose to develop the project bid together (through CEH) rather call in support from a consultancy.

In terms of project planning and supporting the partners to develop the approach, the costs were around £5,000. This included running all the planning session, venue hire and running training for all of the project partners on the use of the Logical Framework approach. This investment proved very valuable in terms of capacity building around the project.

The project also provided an opportunity to both train our own staff up in the use and application of the Logical Framework as a planning tool. This has proven to be an asset in terms of planning and developing other projects. We have also used these skills to facilitate the development of the 'Changing Chalk' Partnership Project with the National Trust and other partners. From this perspective, in spite of the failure to secure funding for the wider Big Chalk Programme, this investment has delivered good value.
