

Notes - discussion document for NMB 16.4.25

The collaborative approach taken by Defra and Welsh Government is very welcome. As part of this process the NMB will be attended by Garreth Dunstall of DEFRA to gather views of the board and guests as to the scope of the proposed research or 'living lab'.

I would be grateful if you could read this e mail from Garreth in preparation for tomorrow and consider any points you may like to raise in response.

I am getting in touch to give you an update on the research project and to ask for your help with the research 'scope'.

As you know, this is a significant piece of work which requires careful planning, which Defra and Welsh Government colleagues are progressing. I outline where we are in terms of project planning and structure below. In the interests of time however, I wanted to contact you today to help us kick-off a discussion about what should be in the research.

We are very grateful for the advice and suggestions you have provided in the previous weeks and months, setting out what you think the research should cover. We are considering this, alongside input from other stakeholders, and will shortly come back to this group with written proposals.

I will be attending the Nutrient Management Board on 16th April and can provide a further update then.

In the meantime, I would ask that you prepare your members to think again about what research is needed in the catchment and consider possible methods. Helping us to re-engage the local stakeholder in this way, will help ensure the research focusses on local issues and deliver the right solutions longer term.

How we plan to agree the scope, and other decisions throughout the project, is set out below:

Decision making and governance

- As noted, we are in the process of finalising our planned structures but would expect our 'working group' to instigate much of the work
- This working group will comprise Defra and Welsh Government officials, along with regulator officials (EA, NE and NRW)
- This group will make research proposals (e.g. scope, methods), which will be given to the 'steering group' to consider
- The steering group will comprise, WCP, NMB, Farm Hereford and other local stakeholders (TBC)
- This group will consider proposals, in line with project aims and objectives, and make recommendations

- The research 'advisory panel', will comprise official science and evidence experts from Defra, WG, NRW, EA and NRW
- The advisory panel will support or reject steering group recommendations, and explain why, and seek endorsement from the Project board
- Project Board will comprise senior officials from Defra and Welsh Government

Research project planning

- We are drafting an outline project plan to set out the sequence of tasks, over time, which need to be completed to deliver the research
- Broadly these will cover: 'Specification' (where we agree what the research should cover and why, which we'll use later to commission contractors to deliver the research); 'Planning' (where we agree structures and governance, to underpin decisions taken during the research, and ensure proper collaboration between parties); and 'Contracting' (where we manage commercial tasks around bids and contractors who will deliver the research)
- We will come back to this group once we have firmer details to share around the plan, noting importance of having clear timelines in place

There are a few other important points I want to make at this stage.

- We need to be clear on the commercial risks associated with this research, and make sure that we follow the necessary propriety around contractors. For that reason I would ask that you don't share any information about the research project with potential bidders for contracts, at this stage.
- Any actions which influence, or are seen to influence subsequent commercial decisions, or give preference to one contractor or business over another, would undermine the project
- As we shape the research, we want to prioritise actions which focus on farm level interventions and give effect to the 'living labs' approach we have trailed previously
- All research decisions must clearly demonstrate good value and correspond to wider government priorities.
- Our Deputy Director, Emma Donnelly, who recently joined the division, is keen to come and meet some of you soon. This should be a good opportunity to underscore the importance of collaboration between stakeholders and working cross border etc.

Looking forward to speaking to many of you next week, and if you have any questions in the meantime do please get in touch

Thanks

Garreth Dunstall | G7 | Water (Environment and Public Health) | Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

I have done my best to produce a discussion document that reflects the progress made by DEFRA and starts the conversation about how we might respond. I have drafted this with the help and support of James Marsden and Kate Speke Adams.

The five problems – High and low flows

Sedimentation of gravels/turbidity

Eutrophication

Temperature of water

Loss of biodiversity

plus

Chemicals of emerging concern

Pesticide/fungicide/herbicide

Invasive species

A Collaborative approach

We are being asked to give consideration to the scope of research that might be undertaken as part of the funding for the living lab.

We need to consider the role of plan making – the NMP and CMP25 as well as River Basin Management Plan, LNRS and others (including Land Use Framework and Carbon Budget 7) and how the data and evidence we already have, or will acquire as part of that process, will influence the decision making.

The initial scope of research.

We need to establish the ecological carrying capacity of the rivers – it is hoped that this will be part of the new DWPP, NMP/CMP25 which are in development.

Taking the main plans as a starting point do a data/evidence gap analysis including on a sub catchment level.

Consider missing or incomplete knowledge around causes and cures – for instance the determination as to whether legacy P losses are biologically active or inactive (May-Sept or winter) which is something WUF have proposed.

Consider ‘on farm’ evidence base for the efficacy of actions in order to ascertain cost benefit and environmental outcomes. Include local knowledge and lived experience as evidence as well as ‘hard data’ to quantify positive impact of sector changes. eg. Nutrient balance tool, Regenerative agriculture benefits.

Consider evidence base for the impact of actions in terms of locality/ co benefits/ acceptance/ outcomes

Consider need to understand societal resistance, culture change, socio-economic drivers and obstacles.

Legacy P – research to improve understanding of the role of total P in soils, the means to run down legacy P indices, and to identify possible pathways, trajectories and timelines.

Consider the early exploration of remediation. This may include research into soil remediation (biochar/phoslite/myco remediation), potential to limit legacy P losses through soil chemistry (calcium v magnesium).

Other potential areas of useful investigation:

A better dataset of soil indices.

Infiltration testing throughout and better knowledge shared about the impact of capped and tight soils on water retention during rainfall and drought.

Planned structure

Working Group (Defra, WG officials plus EA, NE, NRW) will propose research scope and methodology to the

Steering Group (NMB/WCP/FH and others tbd) who will consider against objectives and make recommendation to the

Research Advisory Panel (official DEFRA/WG/NRW/EA/NE) who will support or reject the recommendation with explanation to

Project Board (senior officials DEFRA/WG) to sign off.

Comment:

In order to fully build on a collaborative approach it might be worth considering a blending of Working Group and Steering Group so the officials/ stat officers and local stakeholders (tbc) come together.

Planned project scope

1. Specification – what research and why. This will underpin commissioning of contractor.
2. Planning – structures and governance
3. Contracting – the management of commercial tasks

As the project progresses a focus on farm level research is anticipated.