



Cheshire Hub

Phase 4: Lessons learnt log

Top five learning points

The below points highlight the key learnings from Phase 4 of the Cheshire Hub, in no particular order.

1. The Hub has enabled fluid ways of working, building open, proactive relationships between member organisations and external stakeholders. In-person sessions encouraged relationships to develop between members.
2. A fixed and well-balanced steering group is important for maintaining momentum and to successfully achieving a landscape approach. For example, the membership needs to be consistent throughout the course of the Hub. There is also a place for local authorities to be more involved as key collaborative partners.
3. Stakeholder mapping exercises are valuable to ensure resources are used effectively by supporting groups already working within the relevant themes and to continue to explore avenues that aren't being addressed by existing activity.
4. Legacies from previous phases of work, such as projects that had been established in Phase 3 that are ongoing, meant there were difficulties with project timelines and overlaps in cycles of work between the two phases. This needs to be resolved in advance of new work to ensure momentum is not hindered.
5. It took several sessions for the Hub members to define an agreed set of objectives and key performance indicators that addressed priority issues in the catchment and met the needs of all the relevant organisations. It is worth investing considerable time at the onset to ensure a clear action plan/objectives and deliverables can be set at the start of the process to drive momentum and progress.

1.0 Background

Several organisations and working groups exist in Cheshire that have responsibilities and interests in the operation of catchments, this can lead to complex working situations regarding catchment management. Activities are often delivered in isolation without a joined-up approach; resources are not always focused on understanding what is going on in the whole catchment to ensure that operational interventions are targeted in the right areas for the greatest benefit.

Forming in Phase 3 of Natural Course, the Cheshire Hub has brought together key organisations to work collaboratively and develop a joined-up, improved understanding of the challenges happening across the catchments of Cheshire. The Hub aimed to identify operational issues, decide on the likely cause and target interventions at the right locations to deliver the greatest benefit.

Moving into Phase 4 of Natural Course and building on the lessons learnt from Phase 3, the Hub wanted to maintain its collaborative way of working to continue to understand and respond to new and emerging barriers to delivery.

The objectives of the Cheshire Hub for Phase 4 were:

- *C10.D4 – Development of three collaboratively designed interventions in targeted locations, designed to enhance water quality and deliver natural capital benefits.*
- *C10.D5 – Lessons learnt log detailing approaches to joint communication across the Cheshire region.*

2.0 Start up and work planning

The Cheshire Hub began its Phase 4 journey by recruiting 3Keel as Independent Facilitators. This was in response to recommendations made during Phase 3 whereby it was noted that at times the Environment Agency's role as facilitator of the Cheshire Hub as well as regulator and partner could be difficult to balance and that an independent facilitator, acting from a neutral position, could go some way to overcoming this.

Following the on-boarding of 3Keel, Hub members were sourced from each organisation and monthly meetings were set up.

Membership of the Hub at the onset of the programme, between June 2022 and December 2022, included:

- Environment Agency – Catriona Hare; Craig Higson, Natural Course Programme Manager (at time of joining the Hub, Craig's position was Natural Course Collaborative Officer); Andrew Judd, Environment Planning and Partnership Manager; Stefan Stainsby, Environmental Officer.
- United Utilities – Mark Sewell, Wastewater Catchment Manager; Kate Snow, Catchment Manager; Esther Taylor, Strategy Development Manager Natural Course.
- Natural England – Ben Dugdale, Water Senior Advisor; Petula Neilson, Strategic Plans and Projects Manager and Natural England's Natural Course Project Manager.

The membership changed slightly throughout the course of the programme, membership of the Hub in December 2023 included:

- Environment Agency – Rachel Argyros, Catchment Coordinator; Rose Sumner, Collaborative Officer, Natural Course.
- United Utilities – Helen Broughton, Catchment Partnership Officer; Mark Sewell, Wastewater Catchment Manager; Esther Taylor, Strategy Development Manager Natural Course.
- Natural England – Ben Dugdale, Natural Course Project Officer; Vanessa Jo Girao, Lead Advisor; Petula Neilson, Urban and Wetlands Team Leader.

An in-person workshop was set up for the first Hub meeting in June 2022. Members reviewed outputs and lessons learned from Phase 3 and shared their individual organisation's priorities and interests in Cheshire to identify common themes on which to work together. The collectively agreed areas for work were: Valley Brook Catchment, Weaver Goway Catchment, farmer engagement, a mere and the HS2 Green Corridor.

Within these areas a range of avenues were explored, and conversations were held. This included farmer workshops, Cheshire Young Farmer engagement sessions, road runoff sampling, Sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) mapping, High Speed 2 (HS2) working group and citizen science. This activity emphasised the volume of existing work already ongoing within the Cheshire region.

As a Hub, it was collectively agreed that it would not be the best use of the limited resources and capacity available to duplicate efforts. Instead, the Hub should support those already working within these themes, by communicating with external groups, and to continue to explore avenues internally that aren't being

picked up by existing activity, ensuring joint communication across the Cheshire region. To support this, the Hub collaboratively held a stakeholder mapping workshop to formally document existing groups that operate in the Cheshire region. Although not an intervention in the traditional sense, a formal stakeholder map for Cheshire had not been produced before. It not only helped the Hub to refocus its efforts for wider benefit, but also sustained and/or catalysed the presence of at least one Hub member on several of the identified stakeholder groups with the purpose of improving communication and contributing capacity and resources to enhance water quality and deliver natural capital benefits. Groups with a Hub presence included:

- Valley Brook Catchment Partnership
- Weaver Gowy Catchment Partnership
- Weaver-Gowy Agricultural Working Group (Better Rivers Better North West Farm Cluster)
- GMMC Farm Focus Group
- Natural England Lost Wetland Recovery Project
- Cheshire Landscape Project Partnership
- Cheshire Local Nature Partnership

Following the stakeholder mapping exercise, a key area of focus that was identified by the Hub was the need to move beyond localised, small scale catchment interventions, instead developing landscape scale restoration that has wider environmental benefits for nature and people. After reviewing existing groups and projects across Cheshire, it was felt that the Weaver Gowy catchment presented itself as a natural fit in encouraging a landscape approach to be taken amongst key stakeholders and groups across the catchment. A workshop was held by the Cheshire Hub to promote the value in envisioning landscape scale change with consideration for how this could be applied to the Weaver Gowy catchment. The day included input from over 20 key stakeholders from across the catchment, all of whom brought significant insight and expertise which fed into discussions on a variety of cross-sectional themes including water quality, water quantity, agriculture, land management, access and recreation and innovative financing. Discussions highlighted that attendees agreed that there would be value in pursuing a landscape scale approach for the catchment. This is being fed into consideration on what collaborative working looks like across the Cheshire region going forward.

Engagement through the Cheshire hub highlighted the current issue of nutrient enrichment into Tatton Mere, an important Ramsar/SSSI site identified in Phase 3 planning, resulting in development of the Northern Meres catchment plan. There was organisation agreement to investigate the issue further, and how the Hub could facilitate engagement with relevant stakeholders within the Tatton Mere catchment. Initial stakeholder meetings were held between Natural Course Cheshire hub organisations and the landowner, to discuss challenges and opportunities, with the outcome to help improve water quality within the catchment and ultimately achieve the long-term objective of returning Tatton Mere to a favourable condition. As a result of these discussions, it was agreed that further engagement was required with other external key stakeholders within the catchment, to include the Local Authority (Cheshire East) and the National Trust (landowner). The first step was the organisation of a catchment action group workshop to bring multiple partners and stakeholders together, to identify the key issues and opportunities for water quality improvements within the catchment. An external consultant was recommended to help facilitate the workshop, with the objective of capturing the outputs from the workshop resulting in the initial development of a catchment action plan for Tatton Mere. Natural Course funding was secured for the external assistance required to deliver a bespoke catchment workshop, to be facilitated by Binnies Consultancy, a specialist in technical catchment modelling and management. In addition, the above has helped secure additional complimentary funding of £100K through Natural England's Lost Wetlands Nature Recovery Program, to assist with further catchment investigations required to complete a comprehensive catchment action plan.

The Hub had several conversations surrounding HS2 and the development of a dedicated HS2 working group. The HS2 project had announced that they would be looking to fund environmental projects surrounding the HS2 train line that supported Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG). The ambition of the Hub was to collaboratively produce a collective of projects along the HS2 Green Corridor that not only achieved BNG, but also supported landscape scale restoration, achieving wider environmental outcomes than individually submitted projects. Following the cancellation of the Northern leg of HS2 which ran through Cheshire, this ambition did not come to fruition.



Right: Picture from the Weaver Gowy Workshop held at Quarry Bank Mill

Left: Picture from the Tatton Catchment workshop held at Egerton Hall

3.0 Successes

- The Hub has enabled fluid ways of working over the past 18 months, building open, proactive relationships between member organisations and external stakeholders, allowing a greater shared understanding of organisation's priorities and capacities. The in-person sessions at the start of the Hub Phase 4, encouraged relationships to develop between members. A legacy of working together will remain.
- This collaboration has enabled discussions beyond the Hub, and aided facilitation across other projects.
- The Hub has been effective at identifying areas of work they could support on, other groups they could support in the area, and making decisions to pull out of certain activities where it is clear there is little value to add. This meant the Hub used their limited resources efficiently.
- The Hub has provided a forum to reframe certain problems and consider collaborative opportunities to resolve them, and support conversations that wouldn't have otherwise happened. For example, representatives from Stormwater Shepherds and Better Rivers Better North West (BRBNW) scheme presented during the Hub monthly meetings, opening up communication links between these programmes and Hub members.
- Practically, it has been useful having meetings planned at the beginning of each month, set up in advance, on Teams so that it is clear when updates need to be provided

4.0 Areas of learning to develop

- Due to the broad objectives set by Natural Course, it took several sessions for the Hub members to define an agreed set of objectives and key performance indicators. This meant the first few months of the Hub weren't as streamlined as they could have been following Phase 3, and made it hard for member organisations to know who best to feed into the Hub from their respective organisations.
- There were some inconsistencies of members in the steering group, which was challenging as the Hub felt a little disjointed in terms of participation.
- Defining sub-groups and sub-group owners early on in Phase 4 may have helped drive momentum and outputs.
- Phase 4 had historical links to Phase 3, which brought with it a legacy of questions and uncertainties that still needed answers at the start of this phase. This also meant several of the same themes were identified for this phase of work that had already been focused on during Phase 3, such as a focus on agriculture, work on a waterbody and a mere.
- Cheshire is quite a busy and complicated area in terms of other groups focused on similar goals working in the area. Additionally, 'Cheshire' as an area to focus on, is very broad and incorporates several catchments making it a challenging area for the Hub to work.
- Resources, both in time and financially, to progress work within the Hub has been a challenge. Especially, when the planning phase takes a lot of time.
- There is a place for local authorities to be more involved as key collaborative partners/part of the membership.

5.0 Future work for the Hub

The development of the Cheshire Hub has informed collaborative working approaches across the region. All member organisations have expressed that they would like the legacy of the Hub to continue. The ambition is to continue to support other groups in the area (those identified within the stakeholder mapping exercise), using the open form of communication that has developed within the Hub to carry on working together on a case-by-case basis, resource permitting.