

Fylde Hub

Lessons learnt log

Top five learning points

1. Establishing sub-groups and sub-group owners is an effective way to achieve progress, by providing Hub members with direction, giving a clear sense of working remits and accountability.
2. A well-balanced Hub membership is valuable. Fylde Hub included; members from a range of organisations, such as national authorities and regulators as well as those working on the ground delivering work, individuals at the right level of seniority, and several local representatives.
3. Understanding and developing financial mechanisms for driving private finance into nature recovery takes time.
4. A mixture of in-person workshops and regular online updates gives a good balance for engagement and ensures meetings are easily accessible, allowing consistent attendance. The in-person workshops in particular help build relationships and drive progress.
5. The partnership approach has highlighted the need for catchment management across boundaries. This emphasised the importance of working collaboratively with local authorities. The Fylde Hub allowed organisations to begin this engagement with relevant councils.

1.0 Background

The Natural Course Fylde Hub brought together operational resources from key organisations to develop a cohesive understanding of Fylde and the surrounding area. The objectives of the Hub were to develop a comprehensive, place-based catchment delivery plan and explore how innovative financing mechanisms and funding approaches can deliver interventions in the form of a 'Financial Mechanisms Lessons Learnt Log'.

The principles of the Fylde Hub were influenced by the learnings from the Cheshire Hub. Bearing similarities to the Fylde Hub, the Cheshire Hub recognised that catchment management can often be fractured because of the multiple organisations and stakeholders that lead on responsibilities in their operation. Hence, the Hub sought to trial a new approach to bring catchment stakeholders together to develop a joined-up, improved understanding of what was going on in the catchment and to identify operational issues, decide on the likely cause and target interventions at the right locations to deliver the greatest benefit.

As documented in the Cheshire Hub's Lessons Learnt Report¹ it was recommended that objectives should be collaboratively agreed early in the establishment of the Hub, allowing for activities to be focussed and targeted and for more time to be spent on the delivery of outcomes rather than discussing what could be achieved. Another key learning was that having one of the Hub members chairing the Hub did not always promote full collaboration and resulted in the potential for certain operational agendas and organisational perspectives to dominate. It was suggested that having an independent facilitator, from a neutral position, for Hub meetings could support the alignment of objectives and priorities between all organisations. A noted success was how the Cheshire Hub structured itself with smaller work streams allowing for quick progress to be made.

Taking note of this, prior to its first meeting, the Fylde Hub recruited an independent facilitator, allowing for shared objectives to be quickly identified, ways of working to be determined and work streams to be formed.

¹ <https://naturalcourse.co.uk/uploads/2021/11/Cheshire-Hub-lessons-learned-report.pdf>

2.0 Start up and work planning

The Fylde Hub began its journey by recruiting 3Keel as Independent Facilitators. Following the on-boarding of 3Keel, Hub members were sourced from each organisation and monthly meetings were set up.

Membership of the Hub included:

- Environment Agency – Simon Bennett, Lancashire Senior Strategic Partnership Advisor; Craig Higson, Natural Course Programme Manager; Rose Sumner, Collaborative Officer, Natural Course.
- United Utilities – Robert Allen, Place Based Planning Lead; Sion Platts-Kilburn, Wastewater Catchment Manager; Esther Taylor, Strategy Development Manager Natural Course.
- Natural England – Ben Dugdale, Natural Course Project Officer; Petula Neilson, Urban and Wetlands Team Leader.
- The Ribble Rivers Trust – Harvey Hamilton-Thorpe, Head of People and Learning; Helen Smith, Community Projects and Activities Officer; Jack Spees, Director and CEO.
- The Wyre Rivers Trust – Thomas Myerscough, General Manager.

During an initial in-person workshop in November 2022, the members identified key areas that they deemed important for the Fylde Hub to focus on. These were consolidated into four sub-groups for the Hub to take forward, which were:

- Farmer engagement (including soil health)
- Misconnections
- Sampling and monitoring
- Nature based solutions (including wetlands)

Members of the Hub were assigned a sub-group to lead on, making it their responsibility to set up meetings and workshops focused on each of the sub-groups. The monthly Hub meetings became a space to update on progress.

Farmer engagement (including soil health)

This sub-groups aim was to improve soil management by engaging with the farming community. Priorities for the group were agreed as nutrient management, soil testing and analysis and farmer focused advice. Two farmer cluster meetings were held to highlight the grant support that is available.

Misconnections

The aim of the misconnections sub-group was to understand the impact of misconnections and raise awareness and accountability. To achieve this, several sub-group sessions were held that focused on developing a flow chart showing the misconnections process and identifying the stages at which different organisations should be held accountable.

Nature based solutions (including wetlands)

The aim for this subgroup was to identify and establish place level plans where nature-based solutions could contribute to water quality and quantity challenges. After identifying several possible locations, Marton Mere was identified as an area to focus efforts. Sub-group members went on a tour of Marton Mere and surrounding areas. Following this, the group engaged with the relevant local authorities (Blackpool, Wyre and Fylde) to understand their interest in supporting work in the area as part of a landscape approach. A place-based plan has been developed and work is underway to explore how this can progress once Natural Course ends.

Alongside this work, the Hub has engaged with Storey Homes and Redrow housing developers to discuss a mechanism for developing a sustainable drainage system with them as part of the pre-planning process.

Sampling and monitoring

The intention for this sub-group was to gather baseline data to guide and inform the other work groups. Funding for sampling and monitoring equipment was secured from the Environment Agency on two occasions. However, as there was no accessible funding beyond this, work within this sub-group was restricted.

3.0 Successes

- A stakeholder gap analysis exercise was carried out early in the course of the Hub to identify other groups working on catchment management in Fylde and the surrounding area. There was a need for this consolidatory work to be carried out in Fylde and the surrounding area and it allowed the Hub to focus priorities efficiently, being aware of these groups and proactively bringing them into conversations when needed.
- The membership of the Hub remained the same throughout the length of the Hub's work. This helped momentum. Especially as the identification of work streams and owners allowed progress to be made quickly and provided direction, giving a clear sense of working remits and accountability.
- The mixture of in-person workshops and regular online updates gave a good balance for engagement and kept the meetings easily accessible, allowing consistent attendance. The in-person workshops helped build relationships, and drive progress.
- For the Environment Agency, the Hub provided additional justification for dedicating resources.
- The Hub has influenced other partnerships and discussions and has helped members link into similar groups, such as Turning Tides, and local authorities.
- The Hub has been a safe space to raise issues and have honest discussions. This has allowed relationships to build further between member organisations and colleagues, reinforcing the importance of a network point of view to address catchment issues.
- The Hub membership included individuals at the right level of seniority, i.e., senior enough to make decisions and take actions forward. The membership also included a combination of national authorities and regulators as well as those working on the ground delivering work, which helped drive action.
- The Hub membership included a mix of local representatives, who are long standing in the community, which provided a great source of knowledge.
- The Hub allowed organisations to take stock and focus on some key issues within Fylde and the surrounding area.
- Over £130,000 funds have been levered into the Hub from member organisations, which has been directed into areas such as monitoring and sampling equipment.
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4.0 Areas of learning to develop

- The Fylde Hub had a challenging area to work in for several reasons, such as working across political boundaries, drainage boundaries and catchment boundaries. This meant:
 - The name 'Fylde Hub' was not appropriate, it needed to be more neutral as the Hub covered more areas than Fylde. It took time to change the preconception with external stakeholders that the focus was not just on Fylde, but inclusive of surrounding areas as well.
 - There is a need to work collaboratively with local authorities, ensuring they consider factors beyond their own boundaries. The Hub allowed member organisations to begin this engagement, but it was hard to engage with councils.

- The Natural Course objectives gave a ‘blank page’ approach with broad objectives. If the remit had been slightly narrower to begin with it might have been easier to make progress and engage external stakeholders, such as local councils, at an earlier point.
- Recognition of Catchment Partnerships wasn’t initially forthcoming, however this was altered following advice from the group. This is positive but highlights that the Catchment Partnerships still require more recognition across organisations.
- The commitment to the Hub can require large amounts of resources, which is difficult for small organisations.
- Natural England’s involvement has been mixed, partly through capacity issues and locally available resources and knowledge.
- Regarding the sub-groups, four was a good balance to focus efforts, however some of the subgroups have not progressed as well as others. This may be as the Hub has a small steering group and the sub-groups did not recruit additional people.
- One of the Fylde Hub’s objectives was to gain an understanding of how finance mechanisms could be used to deliver catchment interventions. The Hub held several discussions on this topic.
 - Options to explore included public and private funding and developing a list of ‘shovel ready’ projects that could be taken to potential funders. However, concern was raised that developing lists of projects to be funded can be time consuming and resource heavy.
 - Stanley Park and Marton Mere stood out to the Hub as a potential area where funding could be secured for nature-based solutions as the Hub engaged with the local councils and there were several private companies close to the area that could benefit and so may be open to funding. To push this forward, the Hub has put together a ‘brief’ for the area to show how landscape level benefits could be achieved, with the intention to discuss this with local councils and agree a way forward beyond the scope of the Natural Course.
 - Although conversations have been held and progress has been made regarding finance options in Marton Mere, the Natural Course deliverables of a ‘financial mechanism lessons learnt log’ and the ‘identification of several finance options’ was not achievable. This is primarily because developing a mechanism, or even just securing an agreement, to deliver public private funding into nature-based solutions takes a significant amount of time, due to:
 - Creating a list of viable nature-based solution projects that could be taken forward, including details on delivery plans, measurable outcomes etc. to present to landowners and potential funders can be very resource intensive, which is a significant risk if the projects do not receive funding.
 - Strong relationships need to be established with landowners or local councils who could deliver the work. Regarding local councils in particular, the Hub felt that involvement from them has been limited. On reflection, they felt it might have been better to engage with them at an earlier point. Narrowing down the remit of the Hub, with one clearly defined objective, may have also made it easier to bring in local authorities.
 - Strong relationships also need to be established with potential funders of nature recovery work. These are often businesses who have a link to the local landscape so would see benefit in funding nature recovery that improves ecosystem services in the area, such as delivering natural flood management. It takes time to identify businesses that can fund projects and have the motivation to do so. Once these have been identified, detailed negotiations need to be held between the supply and demand side to secure an outcome all parties are happy with, which can take a significant amount of time.
 - The evolution and uncertainties associated with public funding options, as well as regulatory markets such as biodiversity net gain (BNG), can also create barriers.

Landowners don't want to enter into agreements that may inhibit them from securing public funding options, or funding from other private markets, and businesses don't want to fund measures that the government will pay for. These concerns need to be explored and addressed with both parties to ensure the agreements made are in the best interest for everyone.

5.0 Future work

The development of the Fylde 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 feed the work the Hub has achieved into other regional groups through a transition phase, to ensure the achievements of the Hub are not lost, as well ensuring resources are used efficiently.