

Press Release

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**Nature Improvement Areas need good planning responses**

Interdisciplinary research can help the new Nature Improvement Areas to fulfil their remit of joining up places to benefit wildlife, habitats, communities and the economy, according to [a new publication](http://www.relu.ac.uk/news/policy%20and%20practice%20notes/40%20NIAs/NIAs.pdf) from the Rural Economy and Land Use programme (Relu).

Drawing on research being carried out under the umbrella of the Living With Environmental Change programme, Relu has defined some important principles about stakeholder engagement, partnership working, understanding and valuing the ecosystems that underpin the Earth’s natural processes, and connecting the built and natural environments.

Research has shown that closer cooperation between land managers and policy planners working at the landscape scale could bring benefits for both wildlife and for the provision of the natural services that we need, such as food, clean water and carbon storage. The new Nature Improvement Areas could help to pioneer this kind of approach.

Local Planning Authorities play an important role in helping Nature Improvement Areas fulfil their potential, by embedding them within emerging local plans and development decisions. At present there is a clear divide between the built and natural environment policy realms, but researchers have been testing more innovative approaches that could help to bridge this, and also enable more effective public consultation and stakeholder engagement.

Professor Alister Scott from Birmingham City University carried out research on this theme for the Relu Programme, specifically within the rural urban fringe, where town meets countryside.

He said: “A key role of the Nature Improvement Area partnerships is to involve local people more closely in the management and development of NIAs. Nature is an important community environmental asset, crossing urban and rural realms, which is not fully appreciated in planning policy and practice.

“But people are often put off by the perception of planning as an ‘enemy of enterprise’ with complex language and bureaucracy. The Relu programme has been developing approaches and tools that help reveal how good planning can stimulate more joined up planning as epitomised in the NIA model. From policy brief videos to interactive board games, to community mapping and participatory GIS systems.

“Nature Improvement Areas could make use of these tools and give a lead on landscape scale land management and stakeholder involvement across the UK. However they must not become a simple bolt-on to planning policy, which must recognise the value of the services nature provides to both urban and rural populations.”

Notes for editors:

1. Further information is available in the latest [Policy and Practice Note](http://www.relu.ac.uk/news/policy%20and%20practice%20notes/40%20NIAs/NIAs.pdf) in the Relu series which may be downloaded from the website [www.relu.ac.uk](http://www.relu.ac.uk) .
2. Alister Scott is Professor of Environmental and Spatial Planning, at the Birmingham School of the Built Environment, Birmingham City University
Alister.Scott@bcu.ac.uk or follow Alister on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/bcualisterscott> For more information about the Relu funded ‘Managing Environmental Change’ Project view policy brief videos at: <http://www.bcu.ac.uk/research/-centres-of-excellence/centre-for-environment-and-society/projects/relu/policy-briefs>. Follow the findings of ‘RUFopoly’ BCU’s interactive environmental decision-making game on Twitter <https://twitter.com/#!/RUFopoly>
3. The [Rural Economy and Land Use Programme](http://www.relu.ac.uk/) is an interdisciplinary collaboration between the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), with additional funding provided by the Scottish Government and Defra. Follow Relu’s latest news on twitter @Reluprogramme or website [www.relu.ac.uk](http://www.relu.ac.uk) .
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