Natural Course
Sarah's overview

Summary

Natural Course is the UK's first EU funded LIFE Integrated Project.

We are bringing together stakeholders to improve and protect water quality across the North West River Basin District.

Building capacity by working together, we are addressing the barriers preventing the achievement of 'Good Ecological Status' under the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD).

PROJECT LOCATION

The North West River Basin District is one of 16 river basin districts found in the UK.

With an area of approx. 13,200 km², it crosses the counties of Cumbria, Lancashire, Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Cheshire.

It contains 12 management catchments made up of 43 operational catchments, 632 water bodies, and around 7,500 km of rivers.

Over 7 million people live and work in North West England. It includes large urban areas such as Liverpool and Manchester with high population densities, and the Lake District and Lancashire coastline that are popular hubs for tourists.

However, rural landscape dominates, with 80% of land being used for agriculture and livestock farming.

CURRENT STATUS

One third of the poorest quality rivers in England and Wales are found in the North West River Basin District and, within it, 78% of rivers are not reaching a recognised good standard.

The barriers to fresher and cleaner watercourses are known and included in the River Basin Management Plans, and there are many organisations responsible for managing the water environment (including regulators, operators, influencers and those who undertake projects).

However under the current way and pace of working, we are not on course to reach the ecological targets set for 2027.

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS?

There are underlying challenges for EU Water Framework Directive delivery relating to:

- capacity
- affordability
- technical feasibility
- stakeholder engagement
- adoption of innovative approaches

Natural Course will address these through:

- more integrated water environment decision making
- employing a natural capital approach
- working together to produce local evidence
- aligning with investment directed by river basin planning cycles
- addressing affordability and technically infeasible measures
- describing wider costs and benefits
- the integrated project area: North West River Basin District
- intensive delivery in the Irwell

THE CHALLENGE

The historical and diverse landscape of the North West River Basin District brings with it certain challenges that impact water quality.

- Physical modifications (affecting 50% of water bodies): habitats are lost because of changes to the natural shape and size of water courses for land drainage, development or navigation purposes.
- Pollution from waste water (affecting 24% of water bodies): pollution and chemicals can enter water courses from sewage networks, often under pressure from population growth.
- Pollution from rural areas (affecting 18% of water bodies): too much algae can take oxygen out of water courses and cause harm to fish and other wildlife. This can happen when chemicals, soil and animal faeces are washed into water courses from rural land that has not been managed in the best way.
- Pollution from towns, cities and transport (affecting 13% of water bodies): pollutants from vehicle emissions, bacteria, metals and other debris can enter water courses as rainwater picks them up when it runs over surfaces in our towns and cities.
- Changes to flow or levels (affecting 2% of water bodies): wildlife can struggle to thrive when too much water is taken out of water courses by humans or if not enough rain falls .

Other issues include pollution from old mines, and the cost of dealing with non-native invasive species so they do not destroy habitats or dominate native species.

	Ecological status or potential				
Number of suface waterbodies	Bad	Poor	Moderate	Good	High
613	12	63	405	131	2

Table showing 2015 EU Water Framework Directive Classification of waterbodies in the North West River Basin District.

What percentage of rivers across the North West of England are at a good or high status?

Cheshire, Greater Manchester & Merseyside	3%
Cumbria & Lancashire	34%

Urban reality

We need to understand what is stopping us from meeting targets for good ecological status, and what we can do to resolve it.

Natural Course aims to:

- Find ways of reaching our ecological targets sooner by trialling new ways of working together
- Establish more joined up ways of making decisions that impact our waters in the future.
- Line up investments in the water environment so more money can be made available for improvement works at one time – meaning bigger, more expensive issues can be tackled.