

Northern Heartlands

– from art to action

Working with artists, the Northern Heartlands project engages with communities to explore how their local area has changed over time and describe what they value now.

The information gathered should help to influence future policies, strategies and plans.

Gary Charlton tells us how this special project helps to bring the Natural England's conservation strategy – Conservation 21 – to life...

Aims

Northern Heartlands aims to help people reconnect with their local landscape, nature and cultural heritage. It is guided by Natural England's Landscape Advisory Group.

The project supports our Conservation 21 aim of putting people and their values at the heart of environmental projects. It passes more responsibility to people on the ground and promotes using community-led shared plans for places. It also meets the Government's 25



year environment plan aim of 'a healthy and beautiful natural environment...which we can be proud to pass on to the next generation'.

Natural England are one of the founding partners of the project and act as 'enablers'. It is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) in collaboration with Arts Council England and Historic England. It is one of sixteen Great Places pilots and is possible thanks to £1.5 million funding over three years from June 2017.

Start with people

The project meets an important Conservation 21 aim of listening

to people's views right from the start and helping to better understand communities interests and needs. Northern Heartlands provides a way for local voices to be heard, by commissioning artists to work with targeted communities.

What sets the project apart is artists using non-traditional ways to engage with communities and help tease out information. The artists will bring their own individual ways of working...limited only by their own experience and imagination. In many ways it's this art/landscape led dialogue, facilitated by the artist, that becomes the artwork itself.

More traditional forms of art are also being commissioned to engage local people, from a subterranean dance theatre piece to working with the North Pennines AONB to explore the idea of farmers as the 'curators of the countryside'.

Putting the information to use

Once this information has been collected, the team will work with artists and partners, including local universities.

Together they will articulate and translate the 'community nous' so it can be used to help influence longer term policies and local strategies, such as Neighbourhood Plans.

A targeted approach

To develop this project, we focused on a small group of external partners including Visit County Durham, Newcastle University and legacy Landscape Partnership leads. We also linked in with the North Pennines AONB.

We used National Character Area (NCA) profiles to establish the overall boundary, so that



we could use more targeted approaches. NCAs follow natural lines in the landscape, rather than administrative boundaries. This project stretches from Bishop Auckland and Tow Law in the East to the uplands of the North

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Pennines AONB in the West, including the two major river catchments of the Tees and Wear.

Biggest lessons learnt

- You need to be determined to get things done and sometimes 'stick to your guns' in the face of doubters.
- It is possible to develop projects without having absolutely everything in place... you can't always wait for every scrap of evidence or information before deciding to proceed.

- Start with people.

A lasting legacy

The legacy of the project will be listening to communities about what they value within their environment and reflecting these views in future plans, in order to benefit future generations.

Over the years it is hoped that the project will help to build up social resilience and that 'community champions' can carry on work started.

Find out more

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Useful websites

[Northern Heartlands project](#)

[Great Places pilots](#)

[Conservation 21: Natural England's conservation strategy for the 21st century](#)

[A Green Future: Government's 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment](#)