



# River Nene Regional Park

## Feasibility Study Executive Summary



LANDSCAPE DESIGN ASSOCIATES



## 1.0 Introduction

The River Nene Regional Park (RNRP) is recognised by Government as a flagship environmental project which represents a significant opportunity for Northamptonshire and the Milton Keynes South Midlands (MKSM) Sub Region to deliver a major new environmental undertaking supporting the creation of sustainable communities and improved quality of life for local communities.

In December 2003, Northamptonshire County Council appointed Landscape Design Associates to carry out a Feasibility Study for the Regional Park. The overall purpose of the Feasibility Study as set out within the Project Brief was: *'to identify and assess the key challenges and opportunities provided by the RNRP and make clear recommendations on taking forward this initiative, both in terms of specific deliverable projects, and in terms of the overall unified RNRP vision.'*

The Feasibility Study was carried out between January and April 2004 by a consultant team comprising Landscape Design Associates, SQW Ltd, and Boyer Planning. The consultancy team worked throughout in partnership with the RNRP Project Team at Northamptonshire County Council supported by a Steering Group and a wider stakeholder group of consultees.

## 1.1 Background and context

The concept of a Regional Park focused on the River Nene Valley has been around for some time and indeed is specifically referred to in existing Regional Planning Guidance (RPG8) and the Adopted Northamptonshire Structure Plan (Policy RN1). Whilst the Structure Plan specifies the need for a River Nene Regional Park Policy Area, it is notable that the policy framework at district level is less clear. Renewed impetus for delivery of the Regional Park, and the context within which it is therefore being progressed, has been provided by the Government's Sustainable Communities Plan. The Communities Plan marks a step change in the approach to delivering sustainable communities and has reinforced the growth role of Northamptonshire as part of the Milton Keynes South Midlands (MKSM) Sub Region, one of four major areas of growth in the wider South East. This role has been reflected in the MKSM Sub-Regional Strategy, which following recent consideration at the Public Examination, will form an amendment to RPG8 and the other relevant Regional Spatial Strategies towards the end of 2004.

Within Northamptonshire, the MKSM Sub Regional Strategy focuses growth on two broad areas: the urban area of Northampton which is to accommodate up to 29,400 dwellings by 2021 in support of its status as an important regional centre, and the three towns of Corby, Kettering and Wellingborough which will together provide for an additional 40,000 dwellings over this period in order that they might generally fulfil their potential, and to overcome specific regeneration issues in the case of Corby.

## ***1.2 The study area***

The RNRP Project Brief identified a broad 'Area of Search' for the Feasibility Study, which has become known euphemistically as the 'Red Chilli.' The area extends across approximately 80,000 hectares of Northamptonshire focused on the River Nene corridor and the Rockingham Forest and encompassing seven District and Borough administrative areas. It includes large areas of agricultural land and the main towns of Northampton, Wellingborough, Rushden, Thrapston and Oundle. The settlements of Corby, Kettering and Daventry are located to the outer periphery of the Area of Search.

## ***1.3 Methods***

The Feasibility Study was progressed through a structured approach, which encompassed a number of distinct stages as follows:

- Project inception and data collection.
- Baseline review and analysis - including the planning, environmental, social and economic context within which the initiative needs to be considered.
- Visioning - the preparation of a draft Vision for the regional Park with core aims and objectives.
- Preparation of initial options in relation to boundaries and governance.
- Stakeholder consultations - including one to one meetings and telephone interviews, and stakeholder workshops carried out in November 2003 prior to commencement of the Feasibility study, and on the 4th and 5th March 2004.
- Review of options and preparation of recommendations and Action Plans.

The conclusions of the study are presented within the main Feasibility Study Report dated June 2004. This report is supported by two further documents, the 'RNRP Feasibility Study - Draft Baseline Report' and the 'Tangible Projects Report.'

## ***1.4 Tangible Projects***

A key component of the Project Brief was the identification and assessment of 'Quick Win' projects (otherwise known as Tangible Projects) intended to take forward the Regional Park initiative in the short term. These projects will be delivered through funding secured for the Regional Park from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) and are intended to 'kick start' the RNRP initiative through the early delivery of 'on the ground' projects which address where possible, the core objectives of the Regional Park concept and raise the profile of the initiative between key partners and local communities.

Over 40 potential projects were identified and assessed as part of the Feasibility Study work in partnership with the RNRP Project Team, and a shortlist of projects was identified for submission to ODPM. The assessment process and the conclusions of the assessment are presented in a separate, standalone document (see above), which supported a formal submission to ODPM at the end of March 2004.

## *2.0 Key conclusions*

The early stages of the Feasibility Study focused on identifying the opportunities and challenges presented by the River Nene Regional Park initiative within the context of the existing planning, environmental, social and economic framework. This work also confirmed that a number of initiatives and projects are being progressed within the study area although, at present, there is little or no co-ordination of these activities and as a consequence, the full cumulative benefits of individual investments are not being fully realised. It is essential therefore, that a co-ordinated plan of action is prepared to connect these individual activities to the Regional Park concept, if the Vision is to be realised. The study also concludes that simply maintaining the status quo, hoping that incremental development and individual action will somehow result in a Regional Park or a great environment, will not achieve the kinds of social, economic and environmental benefits demanded of the project. A big picture is needed - one that lifts aspirations, secures joined up action and provides an overarching plan to guide the management of future change.

In response to this, a Vision for the Park has been developed which looks for opportunities where a range of environmental, social and economic development objectives can be fully integrated at the outset for the benefit of people - both visitors and local communities. This Vision recognises the unique opportunity presented by the study area to bring together issues of environmental conservation, enhancement and land management, with the Sub Region's growth and economic development aspirations, to create a truly unique Regional Park concept. Much more than just a string of connected environmental projects, the Park provides the opportunity to demonstrate new ways of living, to set standards for future growth and development, to test new ideas and practices, to explore the implications of growing communities on rural landscapes and on wildlife, and in so doing, provide outstanding opportunities for local communities and a working, living environment for mainstream education and lifelong learning.

Through this Vision, the Regional Park will also become a place that is distinctive and remarkable - that puts Northamptonshire and the East Midlands Region on the map. It will be a centre of innovation and environmental research, internationally recognised as a Beacon of sustainable development and design, supporting the economic prosperity of Northamptonshire. It will provide an outstanding learning environment for schools, local communities and visitors and support the growth in the environmental economy of the County. It will be a place of great beauty and diversity, combining ancient forests and fertile river valleys where wildlife flourishes and history is revealed. It will contain great buildings, natural and designed landscapes and works of art. It will permeate the main towns creating active, vibrant waterways linked to new development and civic spaces. It will provide safe, easy access to a range of leisure and recreation facilities which will be accessible to all ages and abilities and which will be linked together by new footpaths and cycleways along new green corridors. It will be a place that local communities feel proud of and visitors will want to be part of.

Achieving consensus and agreement on the Vision and objectives of the Regional Park is a key issue and without the support of local partners, key agencies, and local communities, the initiative will never move forward. An appropriate method of building this consensus is through the idea of a Regional Park Charter - an expression of agreed aims, desires, and commitments which all partner organisations should be asked to sign up to as an expression of their commitment to work together and with the community in realising the Regional Park. A draft Charter is included within the Feasibility Study.

Delivering the Vision for the Regional Park will require a sustained commitment over the next 20 to 30 years although changes to the environment and to economic prosperity will happen gradually over this time, alongside the growth in population. In the interim, the Park needs to raise its profile and define a new identity. This can be achieved in the short term through the delivery of Tangible Projects, and in the medium to long term, through the concept of Signature Projects. These will be landmark buildings, major environmental arts projects or iconic landmarks at key locations within the Park. They will be designed by leading architects and designers from the Region and elsewhere, potentially through international competition, and will act as 'beacons' of the Regional Park concept.

The Feasibility Study has considered the geographical area of the Park and a number of boundary options were developed and tested with stakeholders during the early stages of the project. Fundamentally, the study concludes that the Regional Park should ultimately be defined by a boundary - a clear line on a plan within which positive planning and land management objectives should be established. However, the process of defining a boundary for any large area of land within which particular objectives or planning policies may apply, or where there may be perceived benefits arising from inclusion or exclusion from the boundary, is a complex and potentially lengthy process. The boundary will, in addition, need to be progressed in consultation with the relevant local authorities and may also need to be subject to a formal period of public consultation as it moves forward through the development plan process.

The Feasibility Study process has focused therefore, on refining the Area of Search in order to define more accurately, the geographical extent of the Regional Park. This refined Area of Search has been termed the 'Regional Park Project Area' and the study recommends that this area is used as the basis for further consultations with key partners and stakeholders on the extents of the park. These consultations need also to consider the process by which the detailed boundary will be defined and further detailed boundary studies will be required to progress this.

The opportunity to extend the boundary to Peterborough emerged as a key issue for stakeholders. In response to this, and having considered the advantages and disadvantages associated with this proposal, the study recommends that this option is considered in greater detail, initially in consultation with Peterborough City Council who have not been represented on the Project Steering Group to date.

The RNRP Project has been progressed to date by the RNRP Project Team supported by a wider group of stakeholders. Whilst this structure has been effective thus far, and may continue be appropriate in the short term, it has insufficient power and autonomy to meet the long term challenges of the project. A new structure of governance needs to be established to deliver the Regional Park and it is essential that this matches the scale of the task required.

The study recommends that a single purpose organisation should be established with specific responsibility for both the implementation and longer-term management of the Regional Park. If there is truly a commitment to the Regional Park, then new structures of Governance should be explored and the feasibility study sets out some a number of potential options. The Sustainable Communities Programme and the proliferation of significant environmental projects now being progressed across the UK, provides an opportunity to press Government for the establishment of new delivery structures for example, Regional Park Authorities or Regional Park Development Companies. These organisations would be based upon existing and proven models and their task would be the delivery of environmental infrastructure projects. Early discussions should be held with Government Office, local partners and existing project champions, to establish the likely level of support for such a proposal which would almost certainly require legislation.

In the absence of such support, whilst the potential to deliver the Regional Park through a formalised partnership of local authorities must remain an option, the study recommends an independent charitable trust as the preferred option, probably with an associated not-for-profit limited company as an operating arm, or potentially a Community Interest Company (CIC) when the relevant legislation is enacted. Further work is required to explore this and other options further

In relation to the overall cost of the Regional Park, the study has examined the costs associated with other green infrastructure projects and provides a framework for testing different development scenarios in order to gauge the overall magnitude of cost associated with these options. It is clear from this analysis, that significant capital and revenue investment will be required in order to deliver the Regional Park and that this will require a range of new and innovative funding mechanisms to be put in place. Indicative costs have been established for delivering the initiative in the long and short term and an initial review of funding streams has identified over 40 potential sources of public sector funding related to the developmental areas identified for the Regional Park including Arts, Environment, Heritage, Research and Development, Regeneration and Sports.

Long term costs for implementing and managing the Regional Park have been assessed under two different development scenarios based upon assumptions regarding the area of land to be subject to restoration or enhancement works. These costs have been derived in turn from a review of costs associated with the delivery of parks and open spaces projects within the UK and overseas drawn from research and practical experience. This work indicates capital costs between the range £180 to £470 million with costs of between £16 and £39 million annually for management and maintenance. This expenditure relates to an overall delivery programme of 20 - 30 years.

In the short term i.e. over the next 2 - 3 years, the study concludes that the overall cost of progressing the initiative will be in the region of £1.2 million. This cost relates to a three year action plan as summarised below. It is recommended that these costs are used as the basis for further discussion with key partner organisations and public sector funding bodies, in order to clearly set out the short term requirements of the project, and determine the likely level of investment that might be forthcoming.

Given that the Regional Park has been recognised as a major development by East Midlands Development Agency (EMDA) this opens up potential for the project to be supported by single programme funding, a major capital and revenue stream for the Region, covering regeneration, innovation, business development and community programmes. The importance of the MKSM development and clear synergies between proposals for the development of the Park and major Regional Strategies, including those of EMRA (East Midlands Regional Assembly) should assist with access to these funds.

However the scale of development planned for Northamptonshire must ultimately be regarded as a massive opportunity to achieve major improvements to the green infrastructure of the County through the development process and these opportunities need be rigorously explored with local authority partners and business during future stages of the project, along with ideas for sustaining the management of the environmental resource in the longer term. Clearly, failure to secure the appropriate level of investment will seriously undermine the ability to deliver the vision for the Regional Park as set out within the Study.

In order for the Vision for the Regional Park to be delivered and sustained over the longer term, it is essential that the concept is fully embedded into the relevant development plans and supported by an appropriate policy framework. The study has considered in detail, the existing policy framework and the changes to the planning system set out in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill, and recommends a series of key planning actions to take the initiative forward. These recommendations have been formulated following detailed discussions with Government Office for the East Midlands and the anticipated revisions to PPS12.

### ***3.0 The need for an Action Plan***

The feasibility study has considered the options, opportunities and constraints presented by the RNRP initiative in the short and longer term and makes detailed recommendations on issues such as boundaries, governance and funding. A fundamental conclusion arising out of this work is that a clear and agreed Action Plan is essential if the project is to progress from concept to reality. Section 9.0 of the Feasibility study sets out therefore, a 10 point Action Plan focused on key challenges and specific areas of work to be progressed over the next two to three years. These include in brief:

#### **ACTION 1 - ESTABLISH A RNRP PROJECT TEAM WITH DEDICATED RESOURCES AND CLEAR TERMS OF REFERENCE**

A transitional organisation will be needed to ensure on-going decision-making and action between now and when the new system of governance becomes effective. It is essential therefore; that a dedicated and full time Project Team is established at the earliest opportunity. This team should have strong leadership and dedicated resources including both professional staff, administrative and technical support. The exact make up of this team will need to be determined although there are significant benefits to be achieved through the retention of the existing Project Team as well as the structure. This should be supplemented by increased participation from key statutory agencies and local planning

authorities either through direct representation on the Project Team possibly through funded secondments, or through a more formalised and structured Steering Group.

The Project Team should have overall responsibility for the co-ordination and management of the RNRP initiative and the commissioning and management of the further studies identified as part of the Feasibility Study. In addition, the Team should focus as a matter of priority, on promoting the concept of the Regional Park with all key partners and agencies, in order to build momentum and consensus, and develop strong links with local authorities, education, tourism, business and industry. The Regional Park Charter provides an effective mechanism for achieving this.

This is particularly important given that there are already several significant environmental and development projects being progressed within the RNRP Project Area all of which have the potential to deliver aspects of the RNRP Vision. It is imperative therefore, that clear mechanisms are established to allow these projects to be linked to, or delivered under the overarching RNRP banner. Subject to the approval of the recommended list of Tangible Projects by ODPM, the Project Team should also be responsible for administering funding to individual organisations and monitoring progress on the ground, reporting potentially to a Project Steering Group. Methods of interim review and reporting will need to be established as part of the overall delivery programme.

## **ACTION 2 - DEVELOP AND TEST KEY ASPECTS OF THE RNRP VISION**

The Vision for the Regional Park will be only partly achieved through capital programmes and the delivery of projects on the ground. The Vision is equally reliant upon building new and improved partnerships and creating linkages to support the cultural life of the park and the knowledge and skills base that underpins the vision. In moving the project forward, it is recommended that the Project Team focus therefore, on the following key areas:

- Building a 'Knowledge Alliance' - to be focused on University College Northampton (UCN) and exploring the potential for linkages with other centres of environmental learning to test the potential for the practical application of projects within the Regional Park area and promote the concepts of sustainability and environmental learning.
- Establishing a 'Green' Artists Network - Build up an artists network and performance programme to support the Green Arena and Sense of Place identified in the Vision and support the Regional Cultural Strategy, the Northamptonshire Cultural Strategy and programmes promoted by Northamptonshire Tourism. The network and programme should be considered as part of a formal 'launch' of the Regional Park. This work should be undertaken in collaboration with the County and District Arts Leisure Services.
- Create Northampton Environmental Technology Transfer Network - Build on the recent UCN proposal to create infrastructure for an environmental network as part of cluster development proposal including a company survey with Northampton Chamber to identify lead players, research requirements with Manufacturing Advisory Service (PERA) and establish an action plan including company focus groups.



- UCN /College - Spinout potential - Identify the existing and future potential for 'environmental' company spinouts from a UCN and FE college base through discussions with relevant Higher Education/Further Education departments.
- Consider the implications of the proposed SPA designation - It is understood that the proposed SPA designation relates to the network of gravel pits along the Nene Valley principally between Northampton and Thrapston although no details are known at this stage. A number of these gravel pits are also being promoted for leisure and recreation and it will be important that the future management of these sites integrates the needs of wildlife with leisure and access opportunities for people. It is recommended therefore, that the implications of the proposed SPA designation are explored more fully in consultation with English Nature and RSPB to inform the preparation of the spatial plan for the Regional Park.

### **ACTION 3 - UNDERTAKE A FEASIBILITY STUDY IN RELATION TO SIGNATURE PROJECTS**

The Vision includes the concept of 'Signature Projects' as a way of raising the profile of the Regional Park in the short to medium term. Whilst a number of potential opportunities have been identified within the Feasibility Study report, further work is needed to test these and other ideas and to determine with partners, those opportunities offering most potential. This work should explore as a minimum, the following ideas:

- Regional Park Central Interpretation Centre - Further stages of the project should review and analyse existing and planned activity within the proposed Park area and determine how best facilities could be enhanced or networked to form part of a central interpretation centre, designed to provide educational facilities, research support facilities and a visitor attraction as part of a plan to develop a sustainable tourism offering.
- Park Sports Action Plan - Identify the opportunities to promote, walking, cycling, canoeing, watersports etc to promote the Regional Park as a Centre of Excellence for active sports through either a single centre or a network of linked facilities.
- A landmark arts project - Establish the support of, and potential partners for, a Landmark Arts Project centered on the river and Nene Valley as a means of engaging with local communities and raising the profile of the project.

### **ACTION 4 - UNDERTAKE FURTHER RESEARCH ON LONG TERM GOVERNANCE OPTIONS**

A priority for further work during the next two years should be the further exploration of the various governance options, commencing with discussions with ODPM, GOEM, EMDA, local authorities and other key stakeholders to establish initially, whether there is likely to be any support for primary legislation. This should be supported by research on existing governance structures related to organisations such as National Parks Authorities, other Regional Parks including the Lee Valley Regional Park, Regeneration Companies, Environmental and Charitable Trusts. This work should also be informed by a recent research study of Regional Park Resources within the North West carried out by consultants on behalf of the North West Regional Assembly (NWRA) and the North West Development Agency (NWDA).

The relationship with existing and proposed organisations, for example the UDC planned for west Northamptonshire, the Rockingham Forest and Wildlife Trusts, should be fully considered as part of this appraisal. Legal advice may be required in order to examine the constitutional and legal implications of one or more of the options.

#### **ACTION 5 - PREPARE FUNDING APPLICATIONS AND A BUSINESS PLAN**

It is clear that delivering the Regional Park will require a significant capital and revenue investment over a period of 20 to 30 years. This level of investment will require a range of funding mechanisms including continued public sector investment and public/private partnerships. There is in addition, a significant opportunity to deliver parts of the Regional Park through the development process via direct developer contributions or the establishment of a central environmental fund or 'green bank'. These opportunities should be rigorously explored with local authority partners as part of any future business planning work.

However, some elements of the proposed programme will remain in the public realm and others will rely heavily, at least initially, on the availability of public funding streams. In many cases, this funding should be used as seedcorn or for leverage or match. It is essential therefore, that there is ongoing dialogue and consultation with central Government, key agencies and local authorities to promote the RNRP initiative, and to secure additional public sector investment.

Preparation of an overall Business plan for the Regional Park is dependent upon completion of a spatial plan and further work on signature projects. Once complete, broad costs should be established in relation to land areas and potential land purchase (if any), together with costs derived from existing and proposed projects, in order to arrive at an overall budget estimate of the cost of delivering the environmental framework of the Regional Park. A Business Plan should be prepared to support this, which should identify key funding streams and partner organisations.

#### **ACTION 6 - UNDERTAKE A COMMUNICATIONS CAMPAIGN TO RAISE THE PROFILE OF THE RNRP INITIATIVE NATIONALLY, REGIONALLY AND LOCALLY**

The Feasibility Study provides new impetus to the RNRP initiative and offers the potential to promote the benefits of the project to a wide range of audiences. Whilst the Feasibility Study sets out a Vision for the Regional Park, the study is also by its own brief, a technical document, which is unsuited for presentation to a non-technical or lay audience.

The success of the Regional Park project in the longer term is dependent upon 'buy in' from key partners at the highest possible level, nationally, regionally and locally. As such, the outcomes of the Feasibility Study will require positive and co-ordinated presentation and the feasibility study recommends that a communication strategy is developed in response to this. In addition, although the initiative has been recorded by the key Regional agencies in policy documentation, its full potential may not be totally understood. The RNRP Project Team should therefore, an early stage, hold a major dissemination event aimed at capturing the attention of the Region's major organisations.

## ACTION 7 - DEVELOP A SPATIAL PLAN

Achieving delivery of the Regional Park concept will require collaboration and partnerships with a range of public and private sector organisations and should be directed towards achieving a co-ordinated network of projects and initiatives that support the over-arching vision of the Regional Park. The preparation of a Spatial Plan is a fundamental stage in this process.

The plan should define the network of publicly accessible land including for example, woodlands, recreation sites, nature reserves and urban greenspace linked by cycleways, footpaths and watercourses that will provide the backbone or 'green skeleton' to the Regional Park. This work should draw upon the Access and Recreation study already underway for the Nene Valley, and other more detailed studies currently being carried out within and around the main urban areas for example, Northampton's proposals for a Cultural Mile, and development currently being promoted to the eastern edge of Corby, in order to ensure that these projects are appropriately linked to, or can be delivered under the RNRP banner. Establishing effective partnerships is clearly central to achieving this.

In particular, studies of the urban/rural interface will be required to support the overall plan and allow consideration of the potential for linkages in these areas including the relationship of the Regional Park to settlement edges, allocated development sites and further areas of growth. It will be important at this stage to gain as much clarity as possible on the future growth locations so that the Regional Park can respond fully to these. The spatial plan will also need to be informed by further work on land ownership, particularly within the core area of the Regional Park and at the urban/rural interface, in order that the opportunities for land purchase and delivery of the Regional Park through the development process can be duly considered.

## ACTION 8 - DEFINE A DETAILED BOUNDARY FOR THE REGIONAL PARK

The Feasibility Study considers the RNRP boundary options and makes a number of recommendations to progress resolution of the detailed boundary. These recommendations should form the basis of a further action plan which should consider in the first instance, the process by which the detailed boundary will be established. The following areas of work should be taken forward over the next two years:

- Consult all local authorities and key partners on the recommended 'Project Area', refine this as necessary to address any issues arising and seek to agree this as a working boundary for the Regional Park.
- Complete an audit of key development proposals and open space initiatives within and adjacent to the Regional Park Project Area to recommend ways in which the Regional Park concept can be delivered by, or linked to these proposals.
- Determine the process by which the detailed boundary will be defined. This could either be completed across the whole area in a process to be led by the Project Team, or by each individual local authority. The process may also be influenced by the preferred option for the long-term governance of the Regional Park.

- Develop criteria for identifying the detailed boundary. Countryside Agency Guidance in relation to National Parks should help inform this process.
- Consider extending the boundary to Peterborough through consultation with Peterborough City Council and other regional agencies and organisations.

#### **ACTION 9 - ESTABLISH AN ENDURING PLANNING FRAMEWORK TO DELIVER THE REGIONAL PARK**

Although the Adopted Structure Plan identifies the need for the development of a locally focused planning framework that will expand upon the broad objectives outlined in Policy RN1, it is clear that this has not to date been carried out. In order to achieve implementation of the River Nene Regional Park in line with the vision it will be necessary to establish this planning framework, to provide a clear statement of the Vision within the provisions of the planning system.

To be effective, it is essential that Structure Plan Policy RN1 is saved under the transitional arrangements (to be set out fully in changes to PPS12) and that provided this is achieved, a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) for the Regional Park relating to Policy RN1 of the Structure Plan, could effectively be advanced following Commencement of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act in Summer 2004. This SPD should take into consideration the content of the Vision, specific identified tangible projects and the agreed boundary for the Park, as well as the criteria specified in the Structure Plan. It would also be possible to set the guidance within the context of the Sustainable Communities Plan and emerging alterations to RPG 8. Key actions should include:

- Meetings with the County Council's structure plan team, local authority chief executives and planning policy teams to discuss the proposed approach and ensure that Structure Plan Policy RN1 can be saved under the transitional arrangements.
- Preparation of a dedicated action plan and programme to guide delivery of the RNRP initiative through the emerging planning framework based upon the detailed recommendations of the Feasibility Study.
- Preparation of a Supplementary Planning Document for the River Nene Regional Park relating to Policy RN1 of the Adopted Structure Plan, in a process to be led by NCC, but to include detailed input from the LPAs, including accordance with SCI's.

#### **ACTION 10 - DEVELOP A CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMME**

For the Regional Park to be successful in achieving its objectives, continued consultation with a wide range of stakeholders and users groups will be required. There will be a need in the early stages, to present the Vision and ideas emerging out of the Feasibility Study and seek agreement on the Charter. Equally, it is important in the early stages, to gain the support of key partners and statutory agencies and a programme of meetings and workshops should be developed to facilitate this. This process should accord if possible, with the requirements set out in the SCI's

developed by the Local Authorities. There is equally, a need to engage with local communities to build momentum from the ground up and involve communities in the design and delivery of the Regional Park at the local level. Key actions should include:

- Developing a consultation programme to review the outcomes of the Feasibility Study with local authorities and key partners.
- Identifying ways in which local communities can engage in the process of developing and delivering the RNRP initiative. Recent work completed by the Countryside Agency as part of an Integrated Rural Development (IRD) programme in the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire, could be used to inform this process.
- Develop a programme with local schools and colleges to promote science and education and explore the opportunities for environmental learning within the Regional Park area.

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

Arising from the Feasibility Study, there is every indication that the Regional Park is a feasible concept that has the potential to deliver significant environmental, social and economic benefits for the communities of Northamptonshire. However, there remain a number of uncertainties and many of the areas identified for further development are embryonic. There is therefore, considerable work still to be done to bring forward these proposals which will require further investment in the short term together with great energy, enthusiasm, and strong and sustained leadership.

The Sustainable Communities programme, together with the growing profile of environmental infrastructure projects nationally and within Government, provides a powerful new impetus for the Regional Park project. If the County Council and its partners are serious about achieving real and lasting change, work on the Action Plan summarised above needs to be progressed before the momentum gathered to date, is lost again.

If there is a commitment to achieving this, through a Vision centered on connecting people, places, knowledge and skills, the River Nene Regional Park has the potential to deliver new ways of living and managing the land and in so doing raise the profile of Northamptonshire and the quality of life of local communities. A Regional Park founded on this basis, provides a significant opportunity for Northamptonshire, and the Milton Keynes South Midlands (MKSM) sub region to deliver a nationally significant environmental project supporting the creation of sustainable communities.

