



# “One voice, nine accents”

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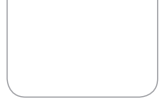
## The need and the opportunity

Tony Blair said Natural England “...could not be more important: to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced, and managed for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development.” The natural environment is shaped by the actions of millions of people and the organisations they work for. To be effective Natural England had to inform, educate and influence the behaviour of others. Couravel was appointed in October 2007 to design and deliver the advocacy programme to help Natural England do this.

Natural England came from three organisations: English Nature, the Rural Development Agency and the Countryside Agency. As one integrated organisation, it had a much wider remit. Previously employees focused on just one issue such as advising farmers on best use of land. Now they had to build an understanding of a broader range of topics: including protecting marine life, climate change and deciding whether bio-fuels are good or bad for the planet. The merged organisation brought internal tensions into the mix as, for example, conservationists clashed with those encouraging people to get out into the countryside. Natural England needed a platform for internal debate to improve its ability to lead informed and persuasive discussion when interfacing with different external groups.

The 2007 employee survey showed that Natural England people lacked the confidence to talk about the organisation and its range of policies:

Employee survey 2007	Agree
I am confident in advocating Natural England’s key policy positions to our stakeholders	16%
I am confident in advocating Natural England’s core purpose to our stakeholders	33%
Natural England does a good job of keeping me informed about matters affecting me	24%



External stakeholder research in September 2007 revealed that they thought “staff feel somewhat confused”. Although stakeholders thought communication was good in terms of lots of contact and documents, they felt, “Natural England is yet to establish a strong reputation as a ‘listening’ organisation. There’s a frequent tendency to ‘talk at’ rather than ‘with’ stakeholders.”

**If Natural England was to be a leader, there was a clear need to equip all employees to talk confidently about Natural England and to be good advocates.**

## 2

### The audience

Natural England had just over 2000 employees, the great majority from the three original organisations and with 10+ years’ service. It had a simple structure, with just four levels:

1. Executive Team and Executive Leadership Group (ELG)	25
2. Principal specialists: leading major projects or specialists on specific areas such as preserving England’s coastline, climate change or marine life	100
3. Senior specialists: e.g. advisors to farmers or advisors on policy	350
4. Specialists/administrators: e.g. people who deal with issues/take calls from external stakeholders, administrators paying grants to farmers, IT support	1550

Employees were grouped into nine regions. They ranged from telephone receptionists to England’s leading expert in bats. Many were passionate about wildlife or the environment. As well as their day job, they were active in local environmental groups in their spare time. But to some it was just a job. In addition to employee survey insights, we attended employee meetings and telephoned employees to hear how they talked about Natural England’s purpose. We led focus groups to listen to employees’ opinions, concerns and interests. Conversations revealed that whereas many had felt that they had been ‘big fishes in a small pond’, they now questioned how they could be heard and contribute to this much larger organisation. They also wanted to get to know their colleagues better.

**This quantitative and qualitative research showed that we needed to create an intervention that would build their understanding of why Natural England had been created and why together, the three former organisations would be a much more powerful voice. We also needed to help leaders and employees build a better working relationship with each other.**



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#### Goal and objectives

We agreed the following objectives with Natural England based on this understanding of its needs. The overarching goal was to equip all employees to act as confident advocates for the organisation, and underneath that to:

1. Build employees' understanding of the purpose and direction of Natural England.
2. Develop employees' understanding of how they contribute to the organisation and what it is trying to achieve.
3. Ensure that everyone is aware of the principles that inform Natural England's policy development.
4. Increase employees' confidence in talking about the organisation to stakeholders.
5. Build employees' capability and confidence so that they can influence partners and stakeholders in a positive way.

**We agreed to measure these objectives through immediate feedback from the intervention, repeating the employee opinion survey and stakeholder feedback.**

### 4

The solution needed to build knowledge and confidence, encourage conversations and build a sense of belonging. We agreed that the solution was to create a one-day workshop for all employees, no matter what level in the hierarchy or what background. We recognised that this would be a challenge given the range of knowledge and experience but the workshop itself needed to be a unifying experience. We also wanted to give employees a further opportunity to learn from one another. Another significant challenge was that, due to time and budgetary constraints, all workshops had to be completed by end April 2008.

We worked in partnership with a design team at Natural England. The client's team members included people from communications, organisation development, external stakeholder management, strategy and Helen Phillips, the Chief Executive. It was Helen who proposed the name, One Voice, Nine Accents to reflect the need for a regional but consistent approach and the need for more dialogue between stakeholders and employees.

#### One Voice, Nine Accents

Following two pilots in January 2008, we ran 108 workshops across England.

Key points about these workshops:

- People were inspired to participate through a teaser campaign in the in-house newsletter. We also used participant feedback from the pilots and early workshops to encourage employees to come.



- Each workshop was led by a member of the Executive team or ELG (top 25) who was supported by one of our team of 8 external facilitators. This leadership commitment was important symbolically.
- In two one-day sessions we coached leaders and facilitators on content. We provided them with very detailed guidelines (see sample) to ensure consistency of messages. We also focused on outcomes and appropriate behaviour and tone.

#### Content of the workshop

The workshop took people on a journey. It included:

- An icebreaking team-based quiz to highlight areas of current knowledge and the importance of teamwork
- A stakeholder film to bring the voice of the stakeholder into the workshop and to highlight their differing communication needs
- Using big posters, a review of the policy making process, current policy positions and the principles that Natural England uses to underpin their development
- A case study enabling participants to apply those principles in a “difficult” wind farm scenario
- An entertaining review of good and poor communication using film footage and recordings, and a discussion of what good communication looks like
- Playback of ‘mystery shopper’: what employees had really said to an external stakeholder (both good and horrifying!)
- The development of personal “elevator speeches” on the purpose of Natural England and the practice of using this in conversations with stakeholders
- The introduction of a stakeholder communication planning tool for personal planning
- A light-hearted, specially-created “Have I got NE News for you” quiz. (This was the only time we were allowed to use the abbreviation to allow the pun on NE.) This was based on the format of a popular UK television programme, where people had to spot the ‘odd one out’, offer captions for pictures and guess the missing word in media articles about Natural England.

**The learning from the workshop was sustained through the on-line in-house magazine and by encouraging all employees to visit stakeholders and projects. We also wrote a Project Closure Report to identify what had worked well, what not so well and how Natural England should build on the workshop.**



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Measurement

Immediate feedback from the workshops was very positive:

Workshop feedback	Agree
I believe all employees have a role to play in influencing what people outside Natural England know and think about the work that we do	94%
I can confidently describe the purpose of Natural England	90%
I understand how to develop a stakeholder plan	80%
As a result of today, I understand the principles used in developing policy	76%
The facilitator led the session well	96%
The senior manager's contribution was valuable	95%

Tracking from the employee survey also showed significant shifts:

Employee survey post-workshop 2008	Agree
I am confident in advocating Natural England's core purpose to our stakeholders (e.g. <i>Forestry Commission, National Trust, English Heritage</i> )	+44%
I am confident in advocating Natural England's key policy positions to our stakeholders.	+16%
Natural England does a good job of keeping me informed about matters affecting me	+30%

Since the advocacy workshops, Natural England has conducted quantitative research amongst external stakeholders:

External stakeholder research post-workshop 2008	Good/very good Well/very well
How would you rate people from Natural England's: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>passion and commitment they display to delivering environmental outcomes?</li> </ul>	85%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>their attitude to you and others?</li> </ul>	85%
How well or not are people from Natural England able to communicate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Natural England's core purpose?</li> </ul>	76%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Natural England's top priorities?</li> </ul>	72%



	Stayed the same/ better/much better
Overall, how do you feel about Natural England's performance now, compared with a year ago?	88%

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### Meeting the goals and objectives

The programme was therefore a significant step in achieving the goal of equipping all employees to act as confident advocates for Natural England. It helped to

1. Build employees' understanding of the purpose and direction of Natural England by setting this out in the workshop and giving employees time to discuss it.
2. Develop employees' understanding of how they contributed to the organisation in sections 3 and 4 of the workshop (see contents of workshop on previous page)
3. Ensure that everyone was aware of the principles that informed Natural England's policy development by exploring these and asking people to apply them to the Wind Farm scenario
4. Increase employees' confidence in talking to stakeholders by building their knowledge of the organisation, and allowing them to practice advocacy
5. Build employees' capability and confidence so that they could influence partners and stakeholders in a positive way. Stakeholders report a much improved relationship.

**By asking leaders to participate in every one of the workshops, One Voice, Nine accents had also gone a long way in improving internal communication and understanding within Natural England. Mixing people in the groups was not always easy but it had helped to build a sense of community in each region and a more cohesive organisation. Employees are now much better equipped to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced, and managed for current and future generations.**



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