**PURPOSE OF REPORT**

The purpose of this paper is to provide an update on the Natural Course (Life EU Funded) programme which aims to drive implementation of the Water Framework Directive at a significant geographical scale. The project aims to promote innovative solutions and to deliver multiple benefits for increased water quality, flood risk management and Natural Capital across the NW River Basin District. The River Irwell is the focus of intensive action for the first 2.5 years of this 10 year programme. This paper outlines a draft work programme for the Greater Manchester elements of the project.

Natural Course is lead by the Environment Agency, the Co-ordinating Beneficiary, working in partnership with four Associated Beneficiaries including Greater Manchester Combined Authority (with Salford City Council acting as lead authority).

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The Board are recommended to:
- Note the report and next steps.

**CONTACT OFFICERS:**

Contact Officer: Mark.Turner@Neweconomymanchester.com

**BACKGROUND PAPERS:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRACKING/PROCESS</th>
<th>Does this report relate to a Key Decision, as set out in the GMCA Constitution or in the process agreed by the AGMA Executive Board</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EXEMPTION FROM CALL IN</td>
<td>Are there any aspects in this report which means it should be considered to be exempt from call in by the AGMA Scrutiny Pool on the grounds of urgency?</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGMA Commission</td>
<td>TIGMC</td>
<td>Scrutiny Pool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20th January 2017</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. INTRODUCTION

Natural Course is an EU LIFE Integrated Project aimed at accelerating delivery towards the objectives of the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) across the North West England River Basin District, with an early focus on the River Irwell catchment. The project is part of the first group of Integrated Projects (IP) funded by EU LIFE. IPs were introduced to drive implementation of environmental legislation at a significant geographical scale and to make an impact at a regional or national level.

Natural Course has been developed by the Environment Agency, the Co-ordinating Beneficiary, working in partnership with four Associated Beneficiaries; United Utilities, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (with Salford City Council acting as lead authority), the Rivers Trust and Natural England. The beneficiaries work together to deliver integrated water management approaches and collaborate to tackle the challenges of the WFD. Projects are delivered at a local level within Greater Manchester by individual authorities and by affiliates of the Rivers Trust.

Natural Course began in October 2015 will run for 10 years. Budgets and work programmes are split into four equal phases of 2.5 years. The project aims to promote innovative solutions and to deliver multiple benefits for increased water quality, flood risk management and Natural Capital across the NW River Basin District.

2. BACKGROUND

The WFD covers all water bodies within Europe. It is co-ordinated at a river basin district level and delivered locally at a catchment scale and aims to ensure that all water bodies reach “good status” by 2027. Current estimates suggest that less than half of European waters will achieve this target and many countries report that the cost of implementing the WFD is too expensive.

The need for action in the NW River Basin District is pressing as one third of the poorest quality rivers in England & Wales lie in the North West. However, long-standing partnerships and relationships developed in the region provide an ideal context for the enhanced integrated working associated with Natural Course.

An early focus for Natural Course will be Greater Manchester (GM) and the River Irwell catchment in particular. Working at a GM level provides opportunities for Natural Course to build on the emerging collaborative working through the GM Combined Authority and to develop an integrated water management framework within the context of the GM Spatial Framework. Meanwhile, the River Irwell catchment presents a number of specific challenges associated with poor levels of water quality and the high risk of flooding.

3. WORK PROGRAMME

A work programme for the first phase of Natural Course, to 31st March 2018, in Greater Manchester has been developed as part of a wider programme of activities for the project. The programme covers five themes or Actions:

3.1 Preparatory Actions

The first phase of Natural Course focuses on capacity-building and a number of Preparatory Actions aimed at developing an integrated water management framework.
This will provide a context and mechanism for increased collaborative working within GM and across the NW river basin district. Specific activities include:

- The formation of a Greater Manchester/River Irwell team which brings together three posts created as part of the Natural Course project (GM Collaborative Team Leader, hosted by Salford CC; Natural Capital Co-ordinator, hosted by Oldham MBC & Ecological Information Officer hosted by Tameside MBC and based within the GM Ecology Unit) and planning, flood risk and natural resource technical officers from GM local authorities.
- Commissioning consultants to collect and analyse existing data, or “evidence”, from the River Irwell catchment and to develop a programme of works, or “measures”, which could be developed and implemented to address the challenges presented by the WFD and to provide enhanced flood risk management and biodiversity benefits. This piece of work is currently underway and consultants will report back in January 2017 when a workshop of partner organisations will sense-check the initial findings.
- Working with the Rivers Trust to identify and understand the synergies between WFD challenges and sources of investment from different sectors and where there are opportunities to link investment to enhance and accelerate delivery of multiple water management benefits for the River Irwell catchment.
- The production of a management plan for the four catchments that cover Greater Manchester; River Irwell, Upper & Lower Mersey and the River Douglas.
- Collation and sharing ecological and environmental information about the River Irwell catchment. GMEU is working with volunteers to conduct surveys aimed at filling gaps in knowledge about the ecology of the catchment. The unit will use the data gathered to propose opportunities for Natural Capital interventions to enhance the biodiversity and ecology of the catchment.
- The Rivers Trust has been commissioned to run a newly-developed model for the River Irwell catchment to understand the potential value and impact of Natural Flood Risk Management (NFRM) interventions to contribute to reduced flood risk across the catchment. This study has been commissioned on a similar time frame to Evidence & Measures study and the outputs will also be sense checked during January 2017.

### 3.2 Concrete Actions

Through Natural Course a programme of practical activity or Concrete Actions will be delivered to help address the affordability of proposed WFD solutions and understand the potential of innovative approaches to delivery. Specific activities in Greater Manchester include:

- Commissioning a study of the existing evidence base to map the opportunities to deliver ecosystem service benefits through the naturalisation of heavily-modified watercourses in the River Irwell catchment.
- Identification of opportunities to address physical modifications that are linked to the industrial heritage of the River Irwell catchment and to work with the heritage sector to tackle the modification. Through this process the Irwell catchment partnership will build up a portfolio of projects across the catchment.
- Building on the Evidence & Measures study to identify sites affected by diffuse urban pollution and to identify opportunities to invest in Green Infrastructure and increase the Natural Capital value to tackle this form of pollution.
- Building on the study of NFRM opportunities to identify opportunities to modify and enhance up-stream Green Infrastructure catchment management to reduce downstream flood risk in the River Irwell catchment. Natural England will lead on exploring how EU-funded agri-environment schemes can be used to increase the resilience of the catchment.
3.3 Demonstration Actions

Natural Course will facilitate and enable members of the Irwell catchment partnership to develop and deliver innovative approaches to multiple-benefit Green Infrastructure investments. Under this Action City of Trees will map the opportunities to use urban catchment forestry to deliver multiple ecosystem services and will deliver three demonstration projects at sites across GM.

3.4 Complementary Actions and mobilisation of resources

LIFE IP project beneficiaries are encouraged to develop “complementary” projects which attract additional resources for the delivery of activity that supports strategic programme delivery (“mobilisation”). This aspect of Natural Course will be increased after the completion of the Preparatory Action studies and the lessons learned from the delivery of the Concrete Actions have been captured.

3.5 Communications and networking

Increased public awareness and effective communications are central to the delivery of LIFE IPs. Beneficiaries are encouraged to network with other LIFE IPs and the beneficiaries of other EU-funded projects. A project specific website will be launched in January 2017 and Natural Course will be launched at the GM Natural Capital Group conference in February 2017.

4. NEXT STEPS

The next stages of Natural Course implementation in GM comprise the completion of the work programme and associated identification of opportunities for collaboration. The studies required as part of the Preparatory Actions, and which underpin the Concrete Actions, will be commissioned. Meanwhile, communication materials will be developed ahead of the launch event in early February and the project will be promoted to relevant audiences within Greater Manchester (e.g. the Infrastructure Advisory Group) and beyond.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 The Board are recommended to:

- Note the report and next steps.