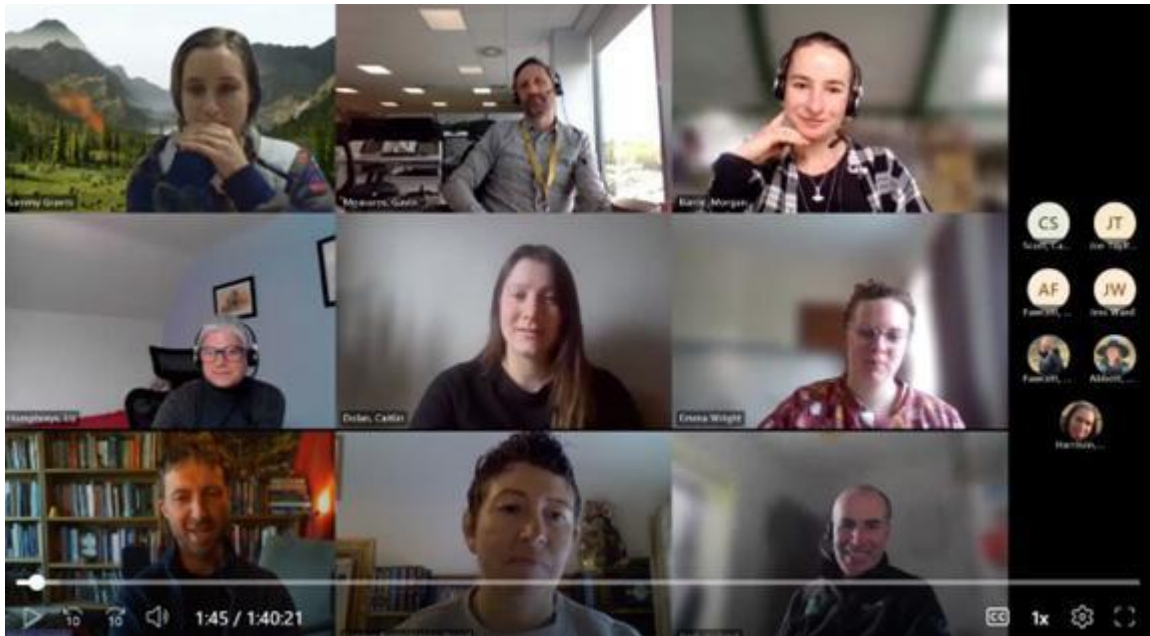


## Case study

**COMING TOGETHER AND BREAKING APART – Exploring the possibilities of digital networking with group discussion and breakout rooms**



LIFE R4ever Kent and LIFE Wader come together for a digital networking session

### When

April 2024

### Where

Cumbria / Northumberland

### Background

The LIFE WADER and LIFE R4ever Kent projects have a lot in common – battling to improve water quality, managing invasive species, engaging with community groups, implementing habitat restoration and, of course, both being based in the north of England.

With Natural England as the lead on both projects, there was a natural collaboration between Project Managers, Liz Humphreys and Morgan Barrie, wanting to bring the shared knowledge and experience of the project teams together. However, despite the relatively close locations of the projects in Northumbria and Cumbria, organising that many people to get together can be a logistical feat that could be considered a project all by itself!

### What we did

As the season is getting busier by the day at this point in spring with preparations for the year's work ahead, Liz and Morgan decided to trial a digital networking event with a twist. Part of the driver for the online approach was uncertainty if all aspects of the projects would necessarily benefit from a visit, but we hoped that by getting to know more about each other's work online, individual work

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teams would be able to identify if a face-to-face meeting between smaller focused groups on either project would be valuable.

This would also be logistically considerably easier than trying to organise a visit for 30-40 people on the same day when not all elements of each project would have activities of interest underway. A digital event could build that knowledge and connectiveness foundation, paving the way to arranging subject or site-specific visits at a convenient time in the future – perhaps to coincide with key events in the respective delivery programmes.

### Outcomes

The plan was to enable the maximum amount of project staff to attend, while requiring the minimum amount of time to be taken out of everyone's schedule. However, we wanted more than just sitting through a PowerPoint presentation, so we planned a trial of a new format.

Each project did have an overview presentation followed by a Q&A for the whole group, but this was followed by breakout rooms to allow the experts in various fields across the projects to have an opportunity to have their own conversations. Breakout rooms were split into shared topics of interest across the projects, namely Wetland and River restoration, Farm Engagement and Water Quality & eDNA Monitoring.

The digital networking event was a fantastic success with 19 people across the two projects able to participate who would not have all been able to get together and gain the invaluable experience if we had tried to organise a face-to-face meeting. We had some nervousness on our digital skills, but Liz and Morgan's preparation by practising with LIFE WADER's Finance Officer, Fiona, as a willing guinea pig being pulled in and out of breakout rooms in a separate meeting in advance paid off!

### Learning

We gained some interesting lessons learnt, having started with a greater variety of breakout room topics, including public engagement and species recovery. With the attendees having their own choice on breakout room, meaning they could either go with their own topic of expertise or choose a different area they wanted to learn more on dictating numbers for each room, we adapted as we went. The farm and public engagements were combined to just cover all engagement work, and species recovery as a separate topic was dropped with elements of this covered between the habitat and monitoring sessions. We had originally allowed for three-quarters of an hour for the breakout rooms but revised this down to half an hour, as we didn't want people sat in a room awkwardly if they had run out of things to discuss.

As it turns out, everyone had lots to talk about and could have carried on for longer when they were pulled back out to the main meeting so, in future, being able to improve our skills and be able to communicate with the separate breakout rooms to either extend or shorten sessions depending on how they are going could improve this further.

We deliberately did not direct the format of the breakout room discussions, as we wanted to allow people to have the freedom to discuss topics of interest, lessons they had learnt on issues they had

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encountered or plans that had gone well, and whether they wanted to share technical detail and practical solutions or simply share frustrations or offload concerns and problems. This built on our previous networking experience where we found that sometimes it can help your outlook when facing a difficulty that even if you don't have a solution yet, you know you're not alone in facing it!

We had no idea when we went into this how well this format would work, but we received some really positive feedback from the participants and found it a great way to give both project overviews and allow for individual discussion and knowledge sharing while taking the minimum time out of people's day to day project work. There were some valuable discussions had around work beyond the immediate LIFE project delivery; for example, different partner organisations identified points of interest that could be of value to them in respect of other aspects of their jobs. This formation of long term, wider connections are just as valuable an outcome from the meeting, you could even call it 'value add'.

### Next steps

In summary, whilst we believe that meeting in person will always give the greatest and best experience, this is not always possible or practicable. In this case, we believe there is a lot to be said for a remote version of networking and are pleased to report that following the success of our trial, it's an approach we'd replicate in future.

### Contact us

[www.r4everkent.co.uk](http://www.r4everkent.co.uk) | [hello@r4everkent.co.uk](mailto:hello@r4everkent.co.uk) | Facebook LIFE R4everKent |  
Instagram @LIFE\_R4everkent | X @LIFER4everKent