Evaluation of the Nature Returns Programme

Second Year Final Report

nature returns

HM Government

A partnership of government departments, charities and organisations working together to build the evidence for Nature-based Solutions to climate change and biodiversity loss.

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Report details

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Foreword

The Nature Returns programme was established in 2021 to pilot and research Nature-based Solutions for climate change at the landscape scale, enabling better decision-making by policymakers, land managers and investors. The original programme was led by Natural England (NE) in partnership with the Environment Agency (EA), Forestry Commission (FC), and Royal Botanic Gardens (RBG), Kew, with sponsorship from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) and funding from HM Treasury's Shared Outcomes Fund (SOF) and Defra's Net Zero Research and Development budget.

In line with programme management best practice, and as a requirement of the SOF funding, ICF was commissioned by NE through a competitive tender process to conduct an independent evaluation of the programme and provide learning support between April 2023 and March 2025.

This report details the findings of the second year of evaluation from April 2024 to March 2025, adding to the previously published Year 1 evaluation report. The report focuses primarily on the effectiveness of the programme's delivery. This complements the programme's research findings, including new insights into how Nature-based Solutions can contribute to Net Zero and biodiversity targets, and how private finance can be leveraged to support this. These findings are summarised in the Nature Returns Summary Report, available on Access to Evidence.

Executive Summary

Background

Nature Returns is a UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) – Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) sponsored programme funded by HM Treasury's Shared Outcomes Fund and led by Natural England (NE) in close partnership with the Environment Agency (EA), Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (RBG Kew) at Wakehurst and the Forestry Commission (FC). The programme, which comprises four workstreams and six partnership projects, aims to build the evidence base on carbon storage and sequestration by species-rich UK habitats and understand how Nature-based Solutions (NbS) approaches can be implemented and sustainably funded.

Approach

ICF was commissioned to conduct an independent evaluation of the programme and provide learning support between April 2023 and March 2025. This report details findings from the second year of evaluation (April 2024 to March 2025). A first-year evaluation report can be found here. In this second year the focus of the evaluation was on early and emerging outcomes and outputs and the processes in place for communicating and disseminating programme learning and setting up the legacy of the programme. Interviews with workstream leads (14), local partnership project team leads (6) and policy stakeholders (10); analysis of programme monitoring documents (108); and feedback surveys (3) were used to gather evidence to answer questions relating to:

- The carbon science, biodiversity and other ecosystem services elements of the programme including habitat creation and restoration.
- Research and partnership project engagement around blended finance and governance.
- Collaboration between programme partners and with partnership projects, and integration of the different workstreams.
- Engagement of stakeholders in policy, science and local communities and dissemination of knowledge generated by the programme.

Findings and key learning

Key findings of the evaluation and learning generated are summarised in Table ES1. Key findings relate specifically to the progress and activities of the Nature Returns programme. Collective learning represents guidance for future similar programmes covering both aspects that worked well and areas that could be improved from the Nature Returns programme. For further details of the programme's main findings see the Nature Returns Summary Report.

Conclusions

The Nature Returns programme has generated significant learning and evidence around carbon sequestration, NbS, and blended funding, with substantial habitat creation and restoration and meaningful community engagement. Despite early delays due to funding procurement, the programme made significant and rapid progress, showcasing successful cross-ALB collaboration and forming strong relationships through regular meetings and forums. That said there have been missed opportunities to maximise the relevance of research and to share the learning amassed, impacting the programme's expected impact. Some of these missed opportunities relate to sporadic engagement from some programme sponsors and difficulties around recruitment of a staff member dedicated to progressing embedding of learning. For the future, similar programmes should ensure strong central management and frequent engagement with policy teams to understand evidence gaps and facilitate relationship building and knowledge exchange.

Table ES 1. Key findings and collective learning from across each of the evaluation themes.

Evaluation theme	Key findings	Collective learning (covering both aspects that went well and where improvements could have been made within the Nature Returns programme)
Carbon, biodiversity and other ecosystem services	• Proposed additional habitat creation and restoration, despite facing multiple challenges, has largely been achieved. • The full impacts of habitat creation and restoration are not expected to materialise for many years. Initial outcomes have been seen in terms of increases in biodiversity and engagement of local communities. • Carbon science research has resulted in a number of novel findings that help to fill evidence gaps and standardise methodologies for collecting data. This includes findings around how NbS can work within under-studied habitats such as hedgerows, scrub and floodplain mosaic. • Through the partnership projects and application of the carbon science, the programme partners have gained further understanding of how NbS approaches can be applied and their efficacy within climate change mitigation and adaptation. • Initial findings have been shared with key policy stakeholders through the Nature Returns conference. Sharing of findings will continue as databases and publications are finalised.	• Allowing delivery partners agency and some flexibility in their work, paired with long-term research and delivery funding has been a particularly successful approach leading to the achievement of the majority of the objectives around habitat creation and restoration. • It is important to set clear yet flexible timelines for data collection and analysis, including contingency time, at the outset and to monitor progress closely throughout the programme, allowing for responsive fieldwork and data collection that achieves its objectives. A central (neutral) management partner may be useful in holding workstreams to account. • Plans for how, where and with whom data generated from research will be used and shared during the programme period were important for guiding WS2 and WS3. These were regularly reviewed and updated where needed. Data should be collected/ cleaned/ analysed with those outputs in mind.

Evaluation theme	Key findings	Collective learning (covering both aspects that went well and where improvements could have been made within the Nature Returns programme)
	• The applicability and wider use of this research is largely yet to be seen but some data has been used in a Land Use Modelling Tool and to put together a bespoke response to the Land Use Framework Consultation.	
Blended funding	• A significant amount of learning, through both commissioned research and practical experience, has been gained by the EA and FC. • Opportunities to share this knowledge with relevant individuals from other delivery organisations have been taken in multiple formats. • The EA and FC have put their learning into practice through development of the Action Learning webinar series. This series provided a suitable opportunity to bring together the learning gained through Nature Returns and share it with those who could utilise it for nature recovery. • Attendees of the Action Learning webinar gave feedback to say that the series had given them confidence to work with uncertainty and get started with their newly acquired knowledge of funding options and appreciation for the value of a well-defined project narrative.	• Blended funding is complex, context dependent and requires significant time commitments. At present "off the shelf" models for blended funding do not exist and as such every situation requires a bespoke solution. • Programmes focusing on this must ensure sufficient resourcing and transparency on commitment with those they wish to collaborate with to help to ensure success. • WS4's efforts to engage with and provide bespoke advice to local partnership projects should be captured and shared widely, particularly with arms-length body (ALB) colleagues and those in local area teams. • Where multiple local level projects are commissioned, it is very beneficial to provide opportunities for sharing of experiences with nature markets, particularly as a novel complex topic of great importance to those working within the nature recovery sector. Both the partnership project forums and the Action Learning webinar series provided good examples of formats for this knowledge exchange and discussion.

Evaluation theme	Key findings	Collective learning (covering both aspects that went well and where improvements could have been made within the Nature Returns programme)
	• Some progress has been made towards strategic funding plans for the partnership projects. The process to create full strategic funding plans has required more collaboration and commitment than originally envisaged. • Progress has been made to test the Land Use Choices Tool (LUCT) using partnership project sites.	
Programme communication, engagement and dissemination	• A variety of outputs and communication tools have been developed by the programme that span different media and audiences. • Reception of the outputs has been mixed (as discussed in section 4) and it is not clear how findings presented in outputs will be used. • Outputs have been developed in response to the needs of the diverse range of research and methodologies. A well-developed calendar and strategic plan prepared earlier in the programme could have maximised the opportunities for communications and outreach. • Partnership projects have been active on communications with support from the programme. • Planning for communications has been collaborative but occurred late in the programme leaving little time for dissemination and communication activity.	• Consider, taking into account the need to be flexible to allow for emerging findings, what the programme outputs are likely to be and how they can best be shared early on in programme development to support effective communication of the programme. • Create a comprehensive but flexible dissemination and communications strategy at the beginning of the programme, that all partners have contributed to and agreed to be accountable to. • Ensure early and continual communication of the programme to relevant stakeholders and policy teams to allow for their input, which could increase the utilisation of programme findings, and inspire stakeholders to communicate to their networks about the programme. Utilise user-friendly knowledge sharing methods, to ensure research objectives are relevant and outputs are in a useful format.

Evaluation theme	Key findings	Collective learning (covering both aspects that went well and where improvements could have been made within the Nature Returns programme)
		• For a programme this size, ensure a dissemination, knowledge exchange and communications team, which draws on resources from across the programme and delivery partner organisations, is in place early in the programme with structures/processes for planning and tracking progress. This can help to create more proactive communications.
Partnership project community engagement	• The community engagement facilitated by the partnership project organisations has been a key benefit of the Nature Returns programme in relation to the commissioned partnership projects. • This year has provided an opportunity for partnership projects to reflect on their engagement approach and implement changes. • The geographical context of the project influences the approach needed for effective engagement.	• Provide guidance and support, including funding, for partnership projects around communications and dissemination to enhance their efforts and ensure communications across the programme are coordinated. • Projects such as those commissioned through the Nature Returns programme can provide strong case studies on how to implement engagement strategies to gain local support for nature recovery and identify further opportunities to support the local environment.
Programme collaboration	• Continuing improvements in collaboration across organisations has been a key outcome of Nature Returns (and an objective of the Shared Outcomes Fund), and it has highlighted the benefit of avoiding a siloed organisational approach. • Although some staff felt that programme internal communication was very effective, many felt the	• Developing partnerships takes time, but this is vital to ensuring good internal communication between partners. Having a network of regular points of contact can help to keep partners up-to-date and facilitate easier handovers in the event of staff changes. Face-to-face meetings and regular steering group meetings, although not always transferable, are most valuable for achieving this aim.

Evaluation theme	Key findings	Collective learning (covering both aspects that went well and where improvements could have been made within the Nature Returns programme)
	coordination of combined outcomes across workstreams could have been better, and there was a lack of clarity on the exact activities, outputs and capabilities of each workstream and partner. Nevertheless, it was broadly felt that coordination had improved as the programme progressed, partly due to improved programme management oversight. • Regular steering group meetings and in person events were seen as most useful for ensuring partners and policymakers were kept up to date. • The relationship between WS1 and the partnership projects continued to improve in the final year due to increased trust and shared knowledge and experience. This enabled a more efficient and confident approach to partnership management which streamlined processes for the partnership projects. • Partnership forums were effective at fostering knowledge exchange and there is an appetite for continued collaboration among many of the partnership projects. • Learning has primarily been embedded through preexisting learning pathways and mechanisms, but WS4 have made an especially strong effort to share learnings with relevant organisations.	• Effective collaboration through partnership working and knowledge exchange across programme partners can maximise positive outcomes if synergies can be identified. This can be facilitated through comprehensive oversight from programme management and regular updates on progress and successes. • Webinars are a particularly useful as a relatively easy medium for sharing learnings. • Potential grant recipients should flag key risks and highlight strengths within their applications, as some can take more time to work with and bring different challenges. This also allows for consideration of where grant recipients can be linked up to help each other overcome challenges. • It is important for workstream responsibilities along with the associated expected activities, outputs and timelines to be mapped out early in the planning process. This plan should be stored by programme management in a master document which also details dependencies and resourcing, with each workstream owning a more detailed breakdown of their specific section. This would simplify reallocation of resources, re-delegation of tasks and enable the identification of cross-cutting tasks to allow for consideration of resource alignment across the partnership.

Evaluation theme	Key findings	Collective learning (covering both aspects that went well and where improvements could have been made within the Nature Returns programme)
		• Due to the similar direction of travel and messaging across ALBs such as the EA, NE and the FC it is worth the additional effort needed to allocate time to communicate aims and find synergies between organisations' objectives and activities.
Cross cutting	• Lessons learned have been broad and numerous relating to both scientific findings as well as best practice that can be taken forwards for similar programmes and projects. • The programme has been, in some instances, responsive and adaptable, where difficulties faced have led to changes in the focus of the workstreams or the ways in which the programme is run. • There has been less adaptation of the programme over time with regards to effectively communicating the programme's learning and setting up the legacy of the programme. Limited work to maximise the impact of the programme mean overall programme objectives to contribute to delivery of net zero may not be met as a result.	• Learning from the programme on best practice and on the challenges of implementing multi-partner programmes, undertaking carbon scientific research, conducting research on and helping partners to explore blended funding opportunities, and navigating government grant processes should be captured and shared widely. • Steps need to be taken to ensure monitoring data e.g., carbon data collected from the partnership projects are stored and able to be shared. • Connections between partnership projects should be supported, where possible, and monitoring should continue periodically for the remainder of the projects' 10 years habitat maintenance funding. A lack of monitoring to capture carbon and biodiversity effects over time would undermine the objectives of the project.

Table of Contents

Introduction

1. Project overview

Background to the programme

Nature Returns (formerly Nature-based Solutions (NbS) for Climate Change at the Landscape Scale programme) is a programme co-sponsored by the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ), supported by the HM Treasury's Shared Outcomes Fund and led by Natural England (NE) in close partnership with the Environment Agency (EA), Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (RBG Kew) at Wakehurst and the Forestry Commission (FC).

The programme aims to provide learning on how carbon accumulates or is released from different habitats in different circumstances and explore how to integrate NbS with other land management objectives, and to make them financially viable. It does so through four workstreams and six local partnership projects, which are piloting NbS approaches and are listed here with their leading organisations:

- Workstream 1 (WS1): Programme and partnership project management (NE)

  Partnership projects:

  - Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration Project: National Trust
  - Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change: Groundwork NE & Cumbria
  - Plymouth's Natural Grid: Plymouth City Council
  - Derwent Living Forest Project: Derbyshire Wildlife Trust
  - Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery: Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust
  - Oxfordshire–Buckinghamshire Freshwater Network: Freshwater Habitats Trust
- Workstream 2 (WS2): Comparative assessment of carbon storage and sequestration (NE)
- Workstream 3 (WS3): Carbon processes and upscaling: high resolution research (RBG Kew)
- Workstream 4 (WS4): Blended finance and governance (EA & FC)

For this additional year, programme partners outlined the objectives shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1. Programme objectives by workstream for 2024/2025.

Workstream	Objectives
WS1	• Oversee programme governance to ensure partners and partnership projects are aligned. • Continue to manage the habitat delivery and support the projects so that they can deliver as much as possible. • Maximise the spend of the programme to make full use of the grant money. • Prepare learnings of the programme and ensure that they are accessible for people to use in the future. • Oversee communications and engagement activities to maximise programme impact.
WS2	• Complete data collection work for this phase - vegetation and soil surveys, LiDAR measurements and carbon and methane flux monitoring. This includes continued baselining at the partnership project sites. • Complete data analysis to reach conclusions for this phase of work. • Prepare the data in an accessible format and produce papers and reports on findings and methodologies. • Execute the oak band monitoring project with the partnership projects (FC leading) • Disseminate early results and methodologies through conferences and media channels. • Complete plans for future monitoring at partnership projects.
WS3	• Finish data collection. • Data cleaning and analysis for below and above ground carbon and gas flux. • Generate datasets and produce papers and other dissemination materials on results and methodologies.
WS4	• Trial the land-use choices tool with 2-3 of the partnership projects and produce associated reports. The aim for the Land-use choices tool is to help people identify what their options are and recognise the multiple benefits that different options will deliver. • Engage partnership projects to develop a long-term funding strategy and investment plan, including creating strategic funding plans with at least 3 partnership projects. • Develop a recommendation for a Green Finance knowledge exchange Community of Practice. • Work with Eunomia to deliver a knowledge exchange seminar series • Plan for and participate in the Nature Finance UK conference on behalf of the programme. • Support development of UK nature markets and green financing mechanisms including through publishing a Buyers Report. • Identifying sites suitable for testing the Woodland Water Code methodology.

Workstream	Objectives
	• Test emerging carbon methodologies from the NEIRF, especially the Wilder Carbon Code and Agroforestry Carbon Code, at interested partnership projects. Subsequently, compare results from these methodologies with those of WS2.

Background to the evaluation

ICF, supported by Strategy Development Solutions Ltd, was commissioned to conduct an independent evaluation of the programme and provide learning support for the Nature Returns programme. The evaluation assessed the implementation and functioning of the programme as a whole, the achievement of the programme's objectives and progress towards intended impacts. This report synthesises and presents findings based on evidence collection across the second year of the evaluation period (from April 2024 to March 2025), comprising two evidence collection phases (see Figure 1).

Timeline

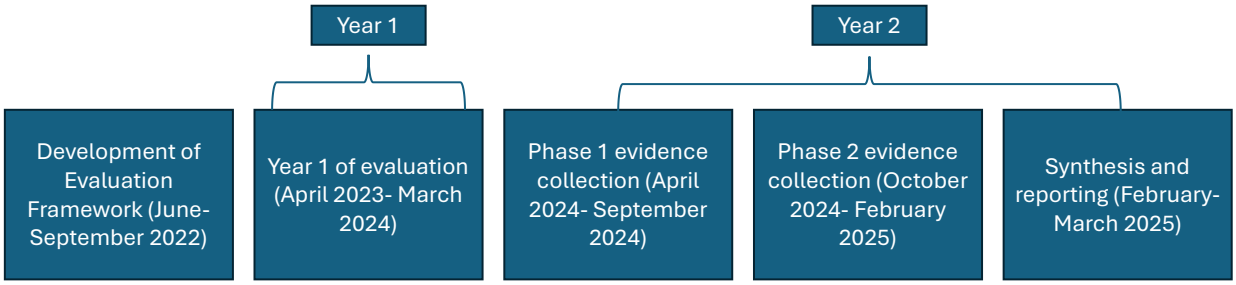


Figure 1. Timeline of the evaluation.

Development of initial Evaluation Framework

ICF worked with the organisations leading and funding the Nature Returns programme in the second half of 2022 to develop an Evaluation Framework. This involved a series of interviews and workshops with the Workstream leads and programme management as well as wider contributors/stakeholders to the programme such as programme Sponsors, partnership project teams and policy stakeholders, in an iterative process (see Annex 4 for further detail on the methodology used). A realist approach[1] was taken, given the importance of context for NbS and carbon fluxes, and the ambition to understand what works, for whom, under what circumstances, and how. The work presented an overarching systems map showing linkages between the four programme workstreams and the four core outcomes, namely (1) Carbon, biodiversity & ecosystem services, (2) Blended finance & governance, (3) Policy knowledge & capacity and (4) Community participation in Nature Returns. A theory of change (TOC) was developed for the programme and for each of the four outcomes. Evaluation questions were developed for each of the outcomes, along with proposed indicators, sources of evidence and analysis and the contexts and mechanisms that support their delivery. This work informed the specification for the recruitment of partnership projects and represented the initial basis for programme evaluation. The TOC has subsequently been refined based on the current evaluation and is presented and discussed below.

[1] A theory-based evaluation approach that seeks to understand "what works for whom in what circumstances" (Pawson & Tilley, 1997)

In addition, the Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) conducted an audit of programme management in January 2023, resulting in the proposal of several improvements as well as learning for broader grant management initiatives. The Nature Returns programme team developed subsequent actions to address findings of the GIAA report.

First year of evaluation

The focus of the first year of evaluation was on the following:

- partnership project selection process and partnership project engagement
- implementation and delivery of the partnership projects
- working relationships between programme partners
- early and potential outputs
- outcomes and impacts of the programme
- the processes in place for programme monitoring.

The research findings presented in the first-year final report built on a scoping report (submitted in July 2023) and interim report (September 2023). Building on the initial TOC developed in 2022, this was refined over the course of the evaluation in collaboration with programme partners.

Theory of change

A programme TOC has guided the development of evaluation questions and evidence collection in the second year of the evaluation. A simplified version is presented in Figure 2, which details how conditions or contexts (blue) set by the programme partners have led to change or mechanisms (green) in turn leading to short-term outcomes (yellow) and the long-term outcome (pink) to help meet net zero and 25-Year Environment Plan targets. Factors in the TOC are divided into sub-sections related to the programme workstreams and intended outcomes, namely:

- Carbon, biodiversity and other ecosystem services
- Blended finance
- Effective dissemination
- Stakeholder engagement
- Programme collaboration

Each sub-section forms a CMO (or series of contexts, mechanisms and outcomes). These sub-sections also structure the evidence collection and report.

Evaluation questions guiding the research and developed from the TOC below are detailed at the start of each section.

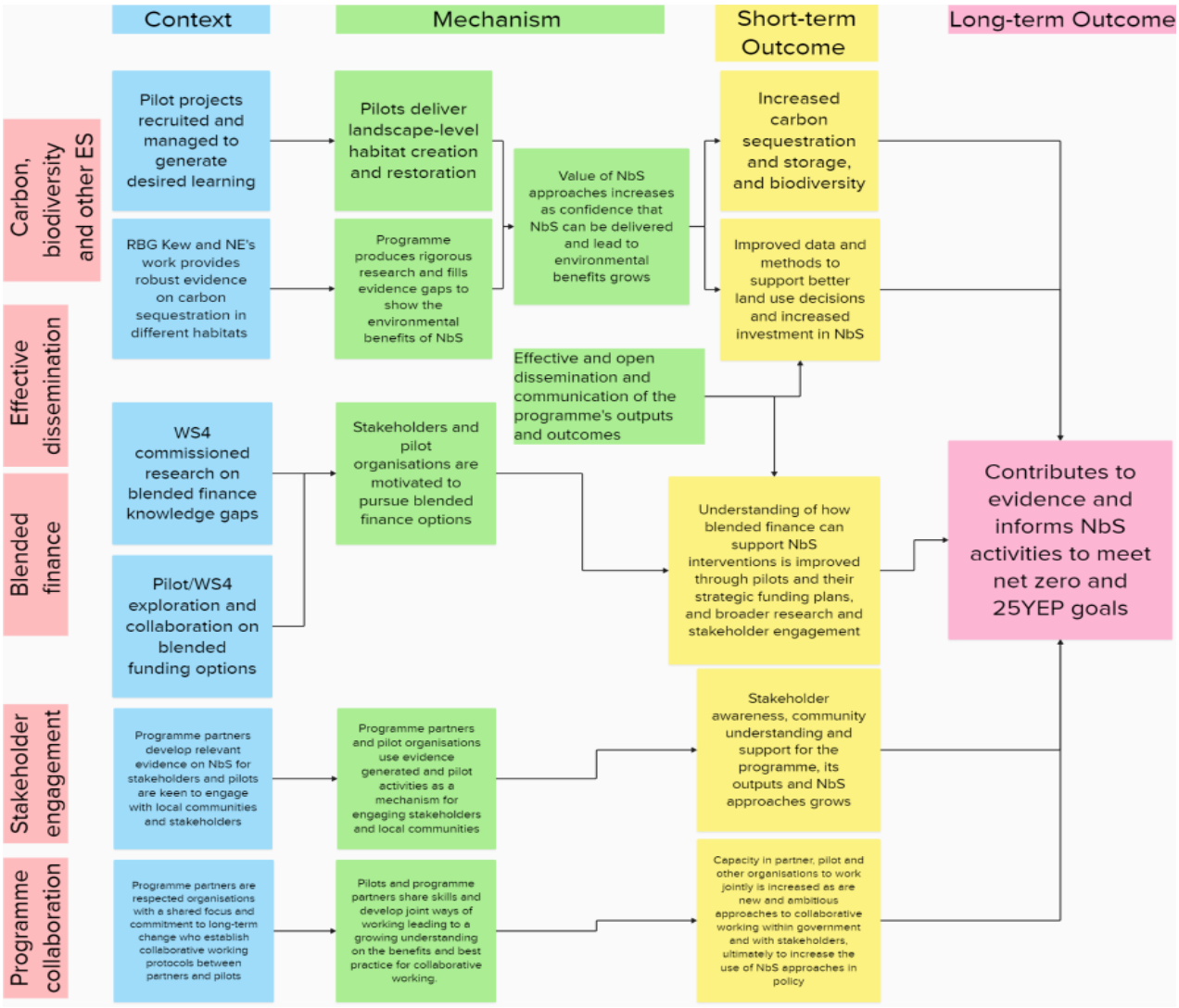


Figure 2. Simplified Theory of change for the Nature Returns programme (full TOC can be found in the Annex).

Approach and objectives for the second year

Aims of the second year of evaluation

For the second year, the evaluation sought to collect evidence to build on the partnership project case studies and learning of the first year. Key research objectives were to:

- Build on learning of what approaches have worked, what challenges have been faced and whether the programme objectives have been met. What has been the benefit of the programme, what is the likely impact and how can this be communicated?
- Explore how data, outputs and learning generated by the programme have been disseminated and used in the short-term. How are the outputs expected to change behaviour and policy?

- Continue exploration of how different organisations work collectively and where this can bring benefits, particularly as working relationships and programme objectives change over the next phase.
- Understand the range of outputs and tools for which programme outputs can be used.

Evidence

The evaluation drew from evidence provided by NE, EA, RBG Kew, FC and partnership project organisations, collected by the ICF-led team. Table 1.2 provides an overview of the evidence base for this report. A detailed description of the research methods and tools can also be found in the Annex 4: Research methods.

The Nature Returns programme is due to come to an end in March 2025, but the impacts and legacy of the programme are expected to continue for much longer (the habitats will be maintained for at least 10 years from the time they were created/ restored). As such, the findings and recommendations presented here can only provide an indication of progress and early outcomes.

Table 1.2. Evidence base.

Evidence	Reporting
• Programme partner interviews (n=6) • Rapid assessment of programme monitoring data (n=33) • Attendance at programme events (n=2) • Development of dissemination and embedding learning theories • Policy stakeholder interviews (n=6) • Post-event surveys (n=38)	Interim presentation report
• Programme partner interviews (n=8) • Rapid assessment of programme monitoring data (n=75) • Attendance at programme events (n=1) • Partnership project interviews (to update case studies) (n=6) • Policy stakeholder interviews (n=4) • Post-conference survey (n=11)	Final report

Limitations

Several factors limited the scope of this stage of the evaluation.

- **The programme is complex and multi-faceted.** Due to the sheer number of different activities being undertaken and the varied partners working on different aspects, a comprehensive understanding of the programme was difficult to obtain at times. In addition, the evaluation occurred concurrently with the programme delivery and so outputs produced after the evaluation end are not included. As such the evidence presented here may not be complete.
- **Restrictions on implementing a robust realist approach**. The focus of the evaluation at this stage was largely on emerging outcomes and internal processes. Without realised longer term outcomes (as the evaluation is happening alongside the programme), the context and mechanisms driving outcome patterns, as explored through a realist approach, were not able to be investigated. As programme outputs and short-term outcomes emerge, future evaluation would be able to explore these patterns in more depth, although outcomes are not expected to be fully realised for some time yet. As a result, the TOC remains a working set of hypotheses. Whilst the evaluation takes a realist inspired approach, we cannot be sure that our hypotheses will be confirmed until short-term and long-term outcomes are realised.
- **Missed opportunities to collect feedback**. Where there was opportunity, for example, the face-to-face workshops and Nature Returns conference, effort has been made to collect evidence and feedback from participants. This was not possible for all events and opportunities due to the short timescales.
- **Limited wider engagement and challenge**. The evidence is largely based on internal documentation and interviews and as such lacked external perspective and challenge, particularly from those who are impacted by the programme. This was explored to some degree through policy stakeholder interviews, but broader policymaker engagement was not possible due to limited responses from policy stakeholders.

Report structure

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

Sections 2 to 6 synthesise evidence collected and present the findings from the second year of evaluation. The sections relate to each TOC theme (CMO) and evaluation questions (set out in Annex 1: Theory of Change).

Each section includes an assessment of the extent to which the evaluation questions can be answered and the strength of evidence for the findings presented, as set out in Annex 3: Strength of evidence assessment. Key learning and recommendations for future programmes are also presented.

The **final section** presents overall conclusions.

Evaluation findings

2. Carbon, biodiversity and other ecosystem services

This section details progress made, and challenges faced in relation to habitat creation and restoration (WS1), carbon data collection and the science-focused work of the programme (WS2 and WS3).

Guiding evaluation questions
• To what extent, how and in what circumstances have partnership projects achieved the proposed habitat changes? • What short-term impacts have resulted from the habitat creation and restoration of the partnership projects? Who has benefitted from this? • What short-term impacts has the carbon science from WS2 and 3 had? Who has benefitted from this? • What scientific methods/protocols have been developed, and which are scalable / applicable in different contexts and timescales? To what extent and in what ways are each of the scientific methods and protocols of the programme likely to be scalable and applicable to different contexts? • Is the data in a format that is accessible and useable? • Have the range of databases, tools and stakeholders the evidence may be of use to been identified and targeted? • Has data from WS2, WS3 and partnership projects been integrated into modelling tools?
Extent to which evaluation questions can be answered
• The evidence base is still in development and so questions are answered in terms of the programme's current and potential to add to the evidence base. • There is a high degree of confidence that the evaluation questions for the partnership project's progress toward habitat changes as well as perceived short-term impacts and anticipated long-term impacts have been answered. • Scientific elements of the programme are still in process and only progress to date and intended outputs in the short-term can be considered. • Impact evaluation questions are largely out of scope for the evaluation at present.
Strength of evidence *(for the findings presented)*
• Evidence is not sufficient to answer all of the evaluation questions fully, but the findings are generally consistent across different respondents and methodologies providing confidence in the findings. • Findings reported are largely supported by two or more sources, particularly around the progress made, potential impacts and challenges involved in habitat works. • There is less consensus on the outputs and challenges to scientific data collection perhaps due to the smaller teams involved in this area.
Research tools
• Interviews with workstream teams and programme partners (n=18) • Programme monitoring data analysis (n=32) • Survey (n=11)

Key findings

- Proposed additional habitat creation and restoration, despite facing multiple challenges, has largely been achieved.
- The full impacts of habitat creation and restoration are not expected to materialise for some years. Initial outcomes have been seen in terms of increases in biodiversity and engagement of local communities.
- Carbon science research has resulted in a number of novel findings that help to fill evidence gaps and standardise methodologies for collecting data. This includes findings around how NbS can work within under-studied habitats such as hedgerows, scrub and floodplain mosaic.
- Through the partnership projects and application of the carbon science, the programme partners have gained further understanding of how NbS approaches can be applied and their efficacy within climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- Initial findings have been shared with key policy stakeholders through the Nature Returns conference. Sharing of findings will continue as databases and publications are finalised.
- The applicability and wider use of this research is largely yet to be seen but some data has been used in a Land Use Modelling Tool and to put together a bespoke response to the Land Use Framework Consultation.

Evaluation results

Partnership projects are largely on track to achieve the proposed additional habitat changes but have faced challenges due to short funding timeframes, small windows within which to complete habitat works and staff changes.

Across the six partnership projects habitat creation and restoration objectives have largely been achieved, apart from a couple of slight shortfalls in woodland creation, species rich grassland, peaty pockets, hedgerows, floodplain mosaic and ponds. This was often due to time restrictions, staffing changes and some landowners withdrawing consent for habitat interventions on their land (Table 2.1, see Annex 6: Partnership project case studies).

Table 2.1. Habitat creation and restoration targets to date for all partnership projects since inception as per End of Year Reports (April 2025).

Habitat type	Target (hectares/metres)	Progress to date (April 2025, as per End of Year Reports)	Percentage progress
Coastal saltmarsh	0.26	0.26	100%

Habitat type	Target (hectares/metres)	Progress to date (April 2025, as per End of Year Reports)	Percentage progress
Fen	11.12	11.12	100%
Floodplain grassland	8.80	8.80	100%
Floodplain wetland mosaic	90.45	72.72	80%
Hedgerow (m)	17,759.30	15,996.00	90%
Lowland heath	98.00	98.00	100%
Orchard	7.30	6.80	93%
Peatland/peaty pockets/blanket bog	89.20	70.20	79%
Ponds/Open water	9.11	7.39	81%
Riparian woodland	0.60	0.60	100%
Mixed/native woodland	400.60	145.77	36%
Mixed scrub	104.67	103.52	99%
Species rich/ semi-natural grass	163.09	93.43	57%
Upland heath	45.55	45.55	100%
Watercourse (m)	3,878.00	2,489.00	64%
Wood Pasture (incl. natural regen)	215.33	189.39	88%
Total Ha	1244.08	853.55	69%
Total m	21,637.30	18,485.00	85%

The partnership project case studies (Annex 6: Partnership project case studies) explore the successes and challenges faced by the projects in more depth.

Habitat works have continued to be impacted by weather-related delays but have largely remained on track. Challenges in achieving habitat delivery have been linked to the mismatch between a short one-year funding timeline and highly seasonal working requirements. On numerous occasions, partnership projects had to wait until both weather and ecological windows allowed for the work to commence. Long-term consistent site management was said to be one of the biggest challenges to partnership projects, with funding for maintenance difficult to obtain. The provision of funding for ten years was said to be a positive of the Nature Returns programme.

There were also delays due to third parties around activities such as council permitting processes, EWCO grant applications, FC EIA scoping processes and Defra's change

control notices. Loss of staff towards the end of the programme was another stressor for several projects, as it not only meant reduced capacity, but also the loss of local and contextual and scientific knowledge. Many projects also found the resource requirement for effective community engagement was much higher than expected, and led to a trade off with habitat work in terms of time and resource allocation.

Factors that were said to have aided partnership projects included:

- Having a previous relationship with key members of community (who can vouch for organisation/project)
- Identifying overlapping projects for collaboration
- Collaborating with land managers and tenant farmers to refine NR proposals
- Having continuity in the programme contact point
- Including local people in the project through volunteering, listening to them, and providing public access improvements, and ensuring volunteers are well supported over multiple years
- Hosting exhibitions to present projects to local community and conducting PR on social media/ in the press
- Using images and drone photography to capture and communicate change
- Uploading ten-year maintenance plans onto asset management software to enable easier delivery in the future
- Using existing information and expertise in designing habitat restoration
- Identifying community focal points to spread messages and understand their needs and challenges

The impacts of habitat creation and restoration works are expected over the long-term although initial benefits for species and communities have been recorded.

For many of the partnership projects the physical landscape has changed as a direct output of the habitat creation and restoration works. For example, in Wansbeck, time-lapse photography shows the successful inundation of paleochannels (flooding of an inactive, historic channel or river). Some projects have also seen changes to species numbers or assemblages, although environmental and biodiversity outcomes of the works are expected over many years in the future. In Exmoor, there has been an increase in the number of birds of prey, barn owls and woodpeckers due to changes in land management, which is being captured through monitoring and anecdotal records. The project led by the Freshwater Habitats Trust has found that many ponds and freshwater habitats restored or created have been colonised quickly and some scrapes and floodplain mosaics have had birds visiting and lapwings breeding there, despite these habitats usually taking several years for plant communities to emerge. The programme was also said to have allowed the development of a long-term strategy for wooded habitat creation and species reintroductions.

Local communities have also seen some initial benefits of the habitat creation and restoration works:

- Positive community engagement and education, including of farmers.

- An upskilled workforce that can replicate these works in other projects in the future.
- The provision of opportunities for trainees and young people working in the green industry.
- Public access improvements.
- Farmers have said the funding allocated to them through the programme has been a catalyst for getting neighbours on board.
- Local consultation and feasibility assessment work was said to have been more comprehensive due to the programme's funding.

The main short-term impacts from the carbon science research under WS2 and WS3 have been an increased understanding of the carbon and biodiversity benefits of poorly understood habitats and the filling of several evidence gaps.

Key questions the programme was trying to answer include:

- What is carbon storage and sequestration in different habitats?
- How quickly does carbon increase in new grasslands?
- How much carbon is stored in woodland versus grassland (scrub)?
- What is the relationship between biodiversity and carbon in different habitats?
- Can we get useful estimates of carbon in scrub and hedgerows using LiDAR?
- How will carbon and biodiversity changes as new habitats develop?

The programme aimed to fill several data gaps to form a multi-habitat evidence base. Novel highlights from WS2 included:

- Carbon and species richness are not proxies for each other but like any ecosystem service there are ways to deliver carbon capture that provide for nature too.
- Soil organic carbon (SOC) stocks were generally higher in older species rich grasslands and were also related to mean annual rainfall and percentage volume of clay.
- Creating species-rich grasslands can take up considerable amounts of carbon over decades, whilst supporting communities of high conservation value. Further work is needed to establish the impacts of different management practices in different locations. Grasslands are important carbon stores, but they do not sequester carbon as quickly as woodlands.
- Some agricultural grasslands emit carbon dioxide year-round, especially with warmer winters. Some grasslands and floodplains also emit methane, which could be linked to soil texture, soil moisture and rainfall.

Novel highlights from WS3 included:

- Measurement of soil carbon can change substantially over the seasons. Hedgerows store significant amounts of carbon for their size and location, and hedgerow restoration should be upscaled as a result.
- Mycorrhizal fungal composition may provide an accurate long-term picture of soil carbon stocks. Two ectomycorrhizal fungi emerged as indicators for higher

carbon soil stocks through research under WS3. Certain fungi can be strong predictors of carbon stocks, and this could help improve national carbon estimates and provide a complementary or alternative approach to estimating soil carbon stocks.

- The loss of old large trees will see a significant reduction in above-ground biomass and thus carbon storage.

For further details of the programme's main findings see the Nature Returns Summary Report.

Findings from the programme were said to be helping to fill evidence gaps and are contributing to increased understanding on carbon storage in different habitats such as grasslands or scrub versus woodlands. This could help practitioners understand the added carbon value of habitat creation and restoration work. The work to understand carbon in hedgerows was said to have *"*tripled or quadrupled the amount of information we have on hedgerow carbon*",* which will help improve carbon emission inventories (Programme partner interview). The diversity, composition and abundance of mycorrhizal fungi in soils were also noted as a particularly important area to take forwards.

The programme was also a unique opportunity to be able to explore specific theories or gaps. For example, the FC are leading research with WS2 and WS3 at Wakehurst to explore evidence that oaks are experiencing stress, shown through slower growth in the warmer weather. They are undertaking oak band monitoring with five of the six partnership projects, which although slow to implement, will be monitored over two years.

Challenges faced in the research include:

- Some sites for research at the Freshwater Habitats Trust partnership project dropped out of the project and this led to a delay in monitoring occurring. It was noted that better monitoring of project performance to make sure projects are on track and are fulfilling the criteria of the grant could help identify potential problems and allow time to develop solutions.
- Delays to data collection and analysis are due to a number of factors including Defra Group commercial processes, which led to delays in partnership project funding and implementation. These delays, however, were well known to programme partners, occurring prior to this additional year, and it is not clear what steps were taken to prevent delays impacting dissemination.

The main beneficiaries of this research have been the academic/science, policy and practitioners community, but research may also be beneficial beyond this.

Emerging results have been communicated to the science and evidence community through multiple outlets. The research community, along with land managers, green finance teams and policy makers in Defra and DESNZ are thought to be main beneficiaries of the research. Findings were said to already be contributing to the carbon codes and being used by practitioners. Defra stakeholders expressed that the

carbon sequestration data from the programme may be valuable for evidence teams in Defra, helping to inform future projects and methodologies. It was reported by programme partners that they were providing a specific Land Use Framework Consultation response based on the programme findings due to a request from the Defra Land Use Framework team. The research findings may also be applicable, as thought by programme researchers, to the national emissions reporting and land use sector emissions.
Policy stakeholder views and suggested uses for the research can be found in Section 4. Programme communication, engagement and dissemination.

A number of scientific methods and protocols have been developed to make carbon measurements in different habitats/organisms easier and standardised. The extent to which they can be scaled and applied in different contexts is unclear.
Most notably the programme, through collaboration between NE and RBG Kew, has tested the applicability of LiDAR technology against more traditional carbon assessments of woody biomass and proven its use in measuring carbon in hedgerows. The development of this method means estimates of carbon in hedgerows are more accurate, indicating the underrepresented carbon storage potential and the need for development of new methods to quantify carbon accurately. LiDAR methodologies have been developed in order to unpick the variation between traditional allometric equations, which provide estimates of tree biomass based on tree measurements, through the ability to generate 3D point clouds (data points on a three-dimensional plane) demonstrating the structural complexity of trees and hedgerows. This also allows for biodiversity to be added as another layer of data and indicates that the Woodland Carbon Code may be underestimating the amount of carbon stored in trees. Scaling LiDAR to be used more widely is likely to be limited by its cost. This resource provides a guide to the methods used by the NE WS2 team to collect baseline measurements at the six partnership project sites. This guide is available to assist others in measuring carbon stock, sequestration rates and vegetation.

The programme has also carried out comparative greenhouse gas flux analyses, including methane which have not been carried out before.

Other methods developed through the programme such as identifying and quantifying mycorrhizal fungi in roots and soils to estimate their contributions to soil carbon and the standardisation of measuring carbon in trees could be powerful ways of more cost-effectively, reliably and accurately estimating carbon – essential to future financial calculations and to be able to reward those taking action to increase carbon. Key aspects of these methods (such as the type of soil corer used) and the analysis approach aligned with other important government projects such as the Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment (NCEA). This is an important aspect for the applicability, replicability and future use of the programme's findings.

Data from the programme is expected to be made widely accessible, although whether it can be used will depend on when and where the data is published, clear communication of how the data was collected and its quality.

Datasets are said to be currently being added to, cleaned and finalised with the creation of shareable datasets by the end of March 2025. Both WS2 and WS3 have clear plans set out for data management and outputs. A processed version of the data is expected to be open access with most housed on NE's Access to Evidence site (WS2) or RBG Kew data repositories and reports (WS3). Large data sets are expected to go into science repositories but there is currently no UK or global repository to share and store data on carbon and biodiversity. WS3 are also likely to publish their data through Zenodo, GitHub (WS2 and WS3) (for code) and Genbank (for DNA data). Programme partners noted that dataset publication must align with publication of their key academic papers (a requirement of the academic publications process), therefore timing of sharing datasets has been constrained by this requirement. Policymakers were keen to understand how the data was collected and any caveats or limitations.

WS2 and WS3 have both developed a number of papers and other outputs (see Section 4. Programme communication, engagement and dissemination for further details). Programme partners noted that most large science-based research projects typically are only able to share substantive findings and dissemination materials a number of years after field research has taken place. Programme partners feel that the Nature Returns programme has managed to produce substantive outputs much more quickly than would normally be expected for a programme of this kind. They noted that increased initial funding for communications work and ensuring clarity of expectations around programme outputs within Defra would have been beneficial for the programme.

There has been some exploration of the databases, tools and stakeholders that the evidence may be of use to, and a stakeholder map and audience map have both been developed (see section 4. Programme communication, engagement and dissemination). Although it was said by programme partners that the data are already being used internally to compare carbon storage by habitat, further development of plans to share evidence and data to different audiences may be needed. Some findings such as those on the role of large and old trees and hedgerows in storing carbon can be put into practice immediately, for example in considering agroforestry within the Woodland Carbon Code. The research on fungi, gas flux and above-ground carbon is thought likely to be valuable to other related projects. There was also a plan to compare WS2 results against the Wilder Carbon code but there may not enough time to do so – this aspect of the programme was additional and is largely dependent on Wilder Carbon completing testing of the code.

Data from WS3 but not WS2 or partnership projects have been integrated into modelling tools.

RBG Kew commissioned the University of Sussex to develop the Land Use Modelling Tool. Some carbon data from WS3 has been integrated into the modelling tool. WS2 and partnership project data has not been applied, as expected within the programme timescale, but may be in the future. Programme partners stated that data will be applied to other carbon models in the future.

Collective learning (covering both aspects that went well and where improvements could have been made within the Nature Returns programme)

- Allowing delivery partners agency and some flexibility in their work, paired with long-term research and delivery funding, has been a particularly successful approach, leading to the achievement of the majority of the objectives around habitat creation and restoration. The full impact of this will not be realised for many years.
- It is important to set clear yet flexible timelines for data collection and analysis, including contingency time, at the outset and to monitor progress closely throughout the programme, allowing for responsive fieldwork and data collection that achieves its objectives. A central (neutral) management partner may be useful in holding workstreams to account.
- Plans for how, where and with whom data generated from research will be used and shared during the programme period were important for guiding WS2 and WS3. These were regularly reviewed and updated where needed. Data should be collected/ cleaned/ analysed with those outputs in mind.

3. Blended funding

This section details progress made, and challenges faced in relation to gaining understanding and capability in blended funding, and development of strategic funding plans by WS4.

Guiding evaluation questions
• To what extent, how and in what circumstances have delivery organisations involved in the programme increased their understanding of (and capability in) blended finance? • To what extent has the evidence generated by WS4 enabled the partnership projects to develop strategic funding plans? How are these going to be implemented?
Extent to which evaluation questions can be answered
• The evidence base is still in development and so questions are answered in terms of the programme's current and potential to add to the evidence base by March 2025. • There is a high degree of confidence that the evaluation question regarding increasing understanding for delivery organisations has been answered. • Finalisation of WS4 blended funding activities is currently taking place, therefore only progress to date and intended outputs in the short-term can be considered. • Implementation of strategic funding plans is out of scope for the evaluation at present due to the current progress of these plans.
Strength of evidence *(for the findings presented)*
• Evidence is not sufficient to answer all of the evaluation questions fully, but the findings are generally consistent across different respondents and methodologies providing confidence in the findings. • Findings reported are largely supported by two or more sources, particularly around the learning generated and progress of strategic funding plans. It is somewhat clear in the evidence how partnership projects have received bespoke support and advice from WS4 to develop their plans. • There is less evidence around how the partnership projects may have utilised reports produced by WS4 and the Action Learning webinar.
Research tools
• Interviews with workstream teams and programme partners (n=18) • Programme monitoring data analysis (n=28) • Feedback survey for the Action Learning Series (n=13)

Key findings

- A significant amount of learning, through both commissioned research and practical experience, has been gained by the EA and FC.
- Opportunities to share this knowledge with relevant individuals from other delivery organisations have been taken in multiple formats.
- The EA and FC have put their learning into practice through development of the Action Learning webinar series in collaboration with Eunomia. This series

provided a suitable opportunity to bring together the learning gained through Nature Returns and share it with those who could utilise it for nature recovery.

- Attendees of the Action Learning webinar gave feedback to say that the series had given them confidence to work with uncertainty and get started with their newly acquired knowledge of funding options and appreciation for the value of a well-defined project narrative.
- Some progress has been made towards strategic funding plans for the partnership projects. The process to create full strategic funding plans has required more collaboration and commitment than originally envisaged.
- Progress has been made to test the Land Use Choices Tool (LUCT) using partnership project sites.

Evaluation results

The EA and FC have significantly increased their understanding of blended funding through commissioning of research and have been successful to some extent in increasing their capability in blended finance by utilising this knowledge to create tools and advise partnership projects.

A significant amount of learning has been generated through WS4's engagement with the partnership projects with the aim of creating strategic funding plans. Details of this can be found in the section below regarding strategic funding plans. This learning will be captured and disseminated within the programme's next report.

Some blended funding learning has also been available to NE (both those within the Nature Returns programme team and beyond) and Defra through the Action Learning webinar series and wider meetings between the EA, FC and NE teams at a national and local level. However, as WS4 was led by the EA and supported by the FC the majority of organisational learning has occurred within these organisations.

The EA put their learning from the previous years of Nature Returns into practice through the Action Learning webinar series which aimed to increase understanding of blended finance for partnership projects and Defra group. There were five webinars in the series each with a different topic focus, many of which came directly from research undertaken by WS4 in previous years of the Nature Returns programme. These webinars were facilitated by Eunomia and took a panel discussion format with an activity at the end for participants to apply their learning. The ambition from the EA is for the Action Learning webinar series to become a package for small groups, internal to EA and Defra arms-length bodies (ALBs) as well as external stakeholders, to use to increase their knowledge on blended finance and move towards creating a strategic funding plan and identifying local networks. WS4 noted an ambition to gain IEMA accreditation for the webinar series.

Additionally, learning has been and continues to be gained through testing of the Land Use Choices Tool (LUCT), and Wilder Carbon and the Agroforestry Carbon Code with partnership project sites. This learning will mostly impact the WS4 EA team, the FC, the LUCT team, those developing the ecosystem service codes and local partners who have been provided with the results of the assessment. Two assessments have been completed on wood pasture sites for the Agroforestry Code with one further application being undertaken. Wilder Carbon testing has taken longer to set up so no assessments were complete at the time of interviewing workstream leads, however they have completed three assessments to ground truth this code.

WS4 are continuing to expand their knowledge through commissioned research, specifically through a gap analysis which aims to look into the possibilities of setting up a community of practice for blended finance across a government and non-government space to promote sharing of learning. Blended finance is being researched and utilised by many different parts of government including within Defra, NE and EA so a community of practice would aim to bring all of this knowledge and experience together in a single hub. The commissioned research will then go directly to Defra to action as appropriate. This research commission also includes a steering group with members from key delivery partner organisations such as NE, EA and FC. This provides another forum for these organisations to increase their understanding on the needs around blended finance and the current use of available tools such as the green finance investment readiness toolkit.

Finally, WS4 team (both EA and FC) have been involved in conversations with delivery partner organisations and wider audiences, demonstrating both their increased understanding and their growing capacity to facilitate learning on the topic. For example, the WS4 team attended the Ecosystems Knowledge Network Nature Finance Conference in November 2024 where the Nature Returns programme was a key sponsor. An EA WS4 team member alongside a representative for one of the partnership projects presented in a seminar titled '*How to harness value for business and society across landscapes and catchments*' which discussed learning from the Nature Returns programme.

Frameworks for strategic funding plans will be developed with three partnership projects by March 2025. These frameworks will be completed to varying degrees due to differing local contexts, organisational aims and pre-existing knowledge levels.

WS4 set out to develop full strategic funding plans with all six commissioned partnership projects as they could provide interesting case studies on how to develop these plans in different geographic locations and with different ecosystem service provision. However, due to some incompatible organisational structures and a lack of resources within partnership projects, WS4 were only able to take this work forward with three of the partnership projects, these were:

- Derwent Living Forest Project: Derbyshire Wildlife Trust

- Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery: Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust
- Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change: Groundwork NE & Cumbria

WS4 have found that instead of the three partnership projects being able to create full strategic funding plans, they will be able to produce more of a strategic framework, which may lead on to a funding plan in the future. Development of full strategic funding plans requires a significant amount of collaboration with various stakeholders across a defined local area to ensure alignment of priorities, thoroughly discuss opportunities for synergy and gain understanding of other funding activities already taking place. Consequently, these discussions and the activities needed to form the strategic funding plans are highly context dependent on parameters such as size of catchment, types of local stakeholders, and current progress, comfort level and understanding around blended finance within the area.

Partnership projects that already had a strong base knowledge of blended funding and were open to (and in a suitable position to) take on a leadership role within the geographic area have been able to progress the most with their strategic funding plans. Partnership project organisations that were less familiar with blended funding and/or work within complex local areas, with many large stakeholders engaged in nature markets, have made less progress towards a full strategic funding plan.

WS4 have utilised learning from commissioned research to inform engagement with partnership projects and to develop the Action Learning webinar series, which was directed specifically towards the six partnership projects. The webinar series included a wide range of panel speakers all of whom were experienced in implementing blended funding strategies in different forms. This culmination of learning from WS4 aimed to provide inspiration to the partnership projects and provide pertinent examples of where differing approaches have worked for nature recovery within the UK. Feedback about the Action Learning webinar series was received from 13 attendees (this includes partnership project leads as well as ALB team members) with the overall series rated an average of 4.1/5 or 'good' in terms of quality. Attendees reported valuing the series for the UK case studies presented by panel members and the opportunity to learn from others. In terms of how they might use this learning to develop strategic funding plans (either for their Nature Returns projects or for other projects), attendees stated that the series had given them the confidence to work with uncertainty and get started with their newly acquired knowledge of funding options and appreciation for the value of a well-defined project narrative. Due to the timeline of this evaluation, it is not possible to report here how the Action Learning webinar series impacted on the strategic funding plans of the three partnership projects in practice.

Overall, learning has been utilised to engage with all partnership projects to varying degrees to promote thinking and actions towards development of a strategic funding plan. Wider promotion of the learning undertaken by WS4 can be found in Section 4. Programme communication, engagement and dissemination.

Collective learning (covering both aspects that went well and where improvements could have been made within the Nature Returns programme)

- Blended funding is complex, context dependent and requires significant time commitments. At present “off the shelf” models for blended funding do not exist and as such every situation requires a bespoke solution.
- Programmes focusing on blended funding must ensure sufficient resourcing, time and transparency on commitment with those they wish to collaborate with to help to ensure success.
- WS4’s efforts to engage with and provide bespoke advice to local partnership projects should be captured and shared widely, particularly with ALB colleagues and those in local area teams.
- Where multiple local level projects are commissioned, it is beneficial to provide opportunities for sharing experiences of nature markets, particularly as it is a novel and complex topic of great importance to those working within the nature recovery sector. Both the partnership project forums and the Action Learning webinar series provided good examples of formats for this knowledge exchange and discussion.

4. Programme communication, engagement and dissemination

This section outlines the programme's outputs to date, the ways in which the programme's learning has been shared with different audiences and early indication of how effective dissemination has been in terms of its reception and likelihood of creating change.

Guiding evaluation questions
• To what extent has learning from the programme been effectively disseminated? What approaches worked, for whom and why? Who has benefitted from this communication? • To what extent has the learning shared by the programme been utilised by different audiences? • Have one or more outputs that bring together the data and knowledge from the programme been created and disseminated? How useful was the output(s)? • Were adequate time/ resources given to disseminate findings from the programme? • Was the audience for dissemination and engagement planned to ensure the right people were engaged in the right way? • In what ways have programme partners engaged with stakeholders such as policy makers, researchers and investors? What approaches worked/ didn't work? For whom and why? • To what extent and how have programme partners been successful in engaging and building relationships with wider stakeholders? • Was a comprehensive and mutually agreed communications plan developed for the programme?
Extent to which evaluation questions can be answered
• Findings from the programme have not yet been fully captured in outputs, and as such the evaluation cannot give a full picture of planned dissemination activity. • A finalised communications and dissemination plan has not been shared and as such assessments of effectiveness and comprehensiveness of dissemination are based largely on interviews. • Impact evaluation questions, in terms of the actions and behaviours the programme may influence, are largely out of scope at present but touched on through feedback surveys from events and policy stakeholder interviews.
Strength of evidence *(for the findings presented)*
• Evidence is not sufficient to answer all of the evaluation questions fully, but the findings are generally consistent across different respondents and methodologies providing confidence in the findings. • Findings reported are largely supported by one or two sources, particularly around the progress on dissemination so far. • There is less consensus on future dissemination plans and how effective dissemination has been.
Research tools
• Interviews with workstream teams and programme partners (n=18) • Programme monitoring data analysis (n=41) • Surveys (n=49) • Policy stakeholder interviews (n=10)

Key findings

- A variety of outputs and communication tools have been developed by the programme that span different media and audiences.
- Reception of the outputs has been mixed and it is not clear how findings presented in outputs will be used.
- Outputs have been developed in response to the needs of the diverse range of research and methodologies. A well-developed calendar and strategic plan prepared earlier in the programme could have maximised the opportunities for communications and outreach.
- Partnership projects have been active on communications with support from the programme.
- Planning for communications has been collaborative but occurred late in the programme leaving little time for dissemination and communication activity.

Evaluation results

A number of different types of programme outputs have been developed including reports, blogs, webinars, presentations at conferences and site visits to increase knowledge of the programme and share emerging findings.

Programme partners indicated the intention to make dissemination a bigger focus for the additional year of work. At the face-to-face workshop in Plymouth in June 2024 there was a consensus from programme and delivery partners that communicating what NbS are and the programme itself was needed, both internally and externally, and that messaging needed to be clear and targeted to achieve the programme's aims. To this end a number of outputs have been developed, published and/or presented, listed in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1. List of dissemination outputs by type and workstream (figures are up to March 2025).

Title	Date	Type of output	Workstream	Additional info
Delivery of workshops with three partnership projects around LUCT	March 2025	Workshop	WS4	
Tools for calculating the carbon content of trees and associated uncertainty using allometric equations and the woodland carbon code. TreeCarbon: UK tree allometrics in R	March 2025	Allometrics in R published on GitHub	WS3	
Action Learning webinars	February 2025	5x Webinars and associated materials	WS4	Approx. 30 attendees per webinar session
Nature Returns Conference	February 2025	Conference	All	92 attendees
How can Nature-Based Solutions address the climate crises?	February 2025	NE Blog	All	
Top insights from Tony Juniper at NR Conference	February 2025	Video (YouTube)	All	331 views
Derbyshire partnership project site visit	January 2025	Site visit	All	12
Emerging results webinar	January 2025	Webinar	WS2 and 3	Approx. 25
UK carbon prices	January 2025	Webpage	WS4	
Four posters and 1 talk and presentation as British Ecological Society conference	December 2024	Conference	WS2	Approx. 1500 attendees at conference, 100

Title	Date	Type of output	Workstream	Additional info
				attendees at presentation
Sponsored and presented at Nature Finance conference	November 2024	Conference	WS4	Approx. 300 attendees at conference, 100 attendees in seminar session
Countryfile section on Wakehurst	August 2024	TV	WS3	5 million viewers
Selling woodland or peatland carbon: could it be right for you?	August 2024	Blog	FC	453 views
Defra-focused programme-level webinar	July 2024	Webinar	All	224 attendees including presenters
One page info sheets about NR being created for the new ministers in the post-election period	July 2024	1 page summary	All	
Buyers of Ecosystem Services in Voluntary Markets	June 2024	Report	WS4	Also available on Green Finance Institute page.
Field Survey Methodology report	June 2024	Report	WS2/3	514 downloads since 15/05
Nature Based Solutions conference presentation	June 2024	Conference	WS2	
Nature Returns Interim Report	May 2024	Report	All	1330 downloads since 15/05
Nature Returns Interim Report blog	May 2024	Blog	All	513 views and 6 likes
Nature Returns explainer film	May 2024	Video (YouTube)	All	750 views

Title	Date	Type of output	Workstream	Additional info
Giant sequoia (Sequoiadendron giganteum) in the UK: carbon storage potential and growth rates	March 2024	Journal article, and media attention from BBC, Guardian, Sky, Countryfile)	WS3	
Access to evidence site: publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5924090708492288	September 2023	Webpage	All	
Kew webpage: www.kew.org/science/nature-returns	N/A	Webpage	WS3	

Alongside these outputs, the communications team, based at RBG Kew, have created a range of materials such as postcards with QR codes, informational leaflets on the science and blended funding work of the programme, and pull up banners with Nature Returns branding for display at conferences. In addition, the team has been active on social media to promote different direct and associated events and publications, including promotion of the interim report on NE's LinkedIn and X (formerly twitter) accounts, and hosting a live Q&A on X with FC carbon experts and other Nature Returns colleagues. Programme activities have also been linked to FC's Carbon Campaign through cross-posting on social media. Challenges to communications and dissemination include a lack of clear messages or findings to promote, difficulties communicating uncertainty to media and policymakers and getting support and coordination around communications from different stakeholders including Defra digital communications and RBG Kew's Nature Unlocked programme, of which Nature Returns is a part.

Several dissemination activities such as the Nature Returns conference and site visit have been used not only to share knowledge but to engage with policymakers. The programme partners engaged primarily with policy teams within Defra and DESNZ and also did some engagement with individuals within NE, the EA and FC. Engagement has also been driven through Policy representation within the programme's steering group and specific policy advisory sub-group.

In terms of engagement undertaken by individual workstreams, highlights included:

- Workstream 2: Hosting Defra and arms-length bodies at partnership project sites and chronosequence sites.
- Workstream 3: Hosting over ten site visits with policy teams at the RBG Kew and Wakehurst sites.
- Workstream 4: Attendance at policy events to give insight on blended funding work such as a governance workshop with the Future Water Framework team in Defra and a fieldtrip with the NE Climate Change team. Conducting the Action Learning webinar series with EA, NE and Defra representatives in attendance.

Future dissemination outputs are planned and include papers and reports on:

- Carbon in species rich grasslands (submitted to Journal of Agriculture, Ecosystems and Environment)
- Carbon dioxide and methane flux in grasslands
- Comparing carbon sequestration and storage in woodlands and grasslands
- Ectomycorrhizal composition and traits predict soil carbon at the landscape scale
- Identifying trade-offs between soil biodiversity and carbon-stocks
- When and where to sample soil carbon stocks across habitats
- A Non-destructive Method for Estimating Hedgerow Biomass
- Regulation and Resilience: A comparison of Soil Carbon Fluxes and Storage across Woodland and Meadow Ecosystems
- A report on wood pasture creation including its benefits, challenges and the policy landscape

- An intercomparison of methods to estimate aboveground biomass of typical UK woodlands
- A Non-destructive Method for Estimating Hedgerow Biomass
- Accelerating, scaling up and enhancing participation in NbS /nature recovery
- Nature recovery in contested multifunctional landscapes (Submitted to Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning)
- Nature for People and Place Project Report
- The Strategic Funding Plan Action Learning Series (materials and course made publicly available)
- Green Finance Communities of Practice report
- Final programme report
- Land use framework consultation response
- Land Use Choices Tool user experience final report
- 'Landscape Integrative Mapping and Modelling for Multi-Functional Analysis' (LIMMMA) platform with web-based mapping and modelling to support land use decision making

Further details on these outputs can be found in the document Programme Outputs JP064 2021-2025.

Several outputs that bring together the data and knowledge from the programme have been created and disseminated. Their reception, where audiences are aware of the outputs, has been largely positive with some suggestions for improvements

Outputs created from the programme, notably the interim report, Nature Returns website, Derbyshire site visit and Nature Returns Conference, have been assessed based on principles derived from research into effective dissemination (see Annex 7: Research brief on best practice in dissemination of research findings) and through policy stakeholder feedback.

Nature Returns interim report

The Nature Returns interim report brought together progress and findings from the programme to date. Policy stakeholders reported being aware of the report, but some had not read it due to the length. A short summary or one page infographic was suggested to increase the number of people who would read such a report. It was unclear who the report was aimed at and thought that there might be more effective means of communicating about the programme, including outputs that situate the programme in terms of its relevance to the audience's work. In addition, it was suggested more could be done to present the achievements of the partnership projects.

Nature Returns website[2]

The Nature Returns website, hosted as a microsite on RBG Kew's site, was created to enable communication with a broad audience and to allow outputs and knowledge to be housed in one place beyond the end of the programme. To allow for a quick launch, easy maintenance over the long-term and to keep the work within the programme budget, a microsite was chosen over a bespoke site.

The landing page has had 553 total views (as of 2nd March 2025). Audiences were reported as coming from a range of sources: direct through links (36), google (24), LinkedIn (9), Defra SharePoint (4) and other referrals through websites (6). The site clearly and succinctly presents the programme and progress to date. It is unclear as to how the site has been promoted, however, and one partnership project was not aware of the website. Planned improvements to the website, based on regular monitoring of the site, include:

a. Optimising the experience for iOS users (the majority of users). This means reducing page copy to make the page shorter.
b. Moving from a narrative style to output-focused
c. Enabling the site to be managed with minimal resource for the 2025/2026 period

Derbyshire site visit

In January 2025, Defra policy teams were invited to the Derbyshire partnership project site to showcase the partnership project work, the WS3 data collection methods and to discuss how the programmes findings could interact with policy. On one hand the site visit was said to be useful for understanding how the budget has been utilised and for seeing case study work on the ground. A positive of the site visit was also the contacts attendees made related to green finance and the Land Uses for Net Zero programme, highlighting the importance of cross-programme collaboration. On the other hand, some felt the project was presented to be very academic and discussions of delivery and work on the ground did not seem relevant to policy teams. Overall, however, there was a sense from stakeholders that site visits were valued as communication and engagement tools.

Nature Returns Conference

The Nature Returns conference '*Landscape-scale Solutions for Climate and Biodiversity*', held on 6th February 2025 at RBG Kew in London, was attended by 92 people. Attendees included Defra policy and evidence teams, DESNZ teams, representatives from NE, FC and Forest Research and 3rd sector individuals. Perspectives on the conference were gathered through a post-conference online survey and interviews with policy stakeholders who had attended the conference (see Annex 4: Research methods).

[2] https://www.kew.org/science/nature-returns

The conference was designed to be a major dissemination tool for the programme. It was said to be well-organised with clear and well laid out presentations. Presentations by Sallie Bailey and Tony Juniper raised the profile of the event. All respondents to the post-conference survey found the conference useful – for gaining a better understanding of the programme and the initial results and for communicating evidence to possible users of the programme outcomes. One respondent noted, “it was great to see some of the initial results and conclusions, which help to provide evidence for restoration and conservation management work”. Some found the science work inspiring and the discussions on green finance stimulating. One respondent stated that it was “useful to hear that projects in different parts of the country are experiencing the same issues and frustrations with progressing green finance”. All respondents spoke to the relevance of the programme and research to their work on funding environmental research, levering private finance, habitat creation and restoration, impacts and benefits of land use change, evidence-based policy and advocacy (post-conference survey).

Several conference attendees felt it remained unclear what the programme’s research was trying to achieve, that the results from initial speakers were not novel, and that the green finance panel session was not structured and did not have the positivity of the previous sessions. The conference was seen as a good way of summarising the programme for those unaware of it but less useful for presenting new information. One policy interviewee questioned the purpose of the conference and thought it more of a scientific showcase than a presentation of what the programme has delivered in the past four years. Several interviewees felt that they would have liked to hear more from the partnership projects.

Interviewees and respondents noted that some of the presentations reaffirmed known information rather than presenting new findings, particularly in terms of soil carbon studies. Several Defra science colleagues questioned the programme’s progress and felt that it had provided some context specific confirmation of concepts but that the concepts were already known to Defra teams. For example, LiDAR was said to be being presented as novel when experts felt it was a fairly well-known technology. Programme partners noted that the use of LiDAR for scrub and hedgerow was not extensively used.

Conference attendees were keen to hear about how to get more private investment but felt the afternoon discussion on blended funding fell short. The discussion was said to be unstructured and quite confusing, and it was not clear whether anyone involved in Nature Returns was on the panel. One interviewee said that the panel session seemed to just be opinions, giving the impression that the programme has not been successful in bringing in private finance. Rather they would have liked to see a presentation of what the programme found and bringing together of learning across the six partnership projects. In addition, another attendee found the blended funding session uncomfortable as a civil servant and designed to provoke reaction. Several attendees were unsure as to how the blended funding work fit within the wider programme.

Improvements to the conference and programme suggested by survey respondents were:

- To be bolder about the policy implications from the work.
- To maintain the momentum and learning that is just starting to emerge including through collaborating with other projects that are collecting data.
- To join up with the Natural Capital Ecosystem Assessment (NCEA) to compare methods and allow soil samples to be compared and brought into a larger database, which may be in scope for future work.
- To better explain whether the programme is a monitoring and evaluation project following on from the baselining, a restoration programme or a research programme as the distinction was said to be unclear.
- To explain how the programme aligns with other parts of the NE research portfolio in these disciplines.
- For the future, to incorporate a focus on managing water in the landscapes.
- To provide more of the detail that time did not allow to be presented through webinars or other meetings, which are being planned.
- Submission of questions in advance for better Q&A sessions

Access to Evidence site

Additionally, the Nature Returns programme has a page within the NE Access to Evidence site[3] where all published commissioned report outputs from the programme have been made available to the public. This includes reports across carbon and biodiversity research, project governance and funding guidance, nature markets guidance, the interim report, and the field survey methodology.

Exploration of the audience for dissemination and engagement took place but did not lead to a strategic plan for how to share information with different audiences and some key audiences were relatively unaware of the Nature Returns programme.

Programme partners agree that there are a variety of audiences the outputs of Nature Returns could be of use to. Several versions of stakeholder mapping and audience segmentation analysis were undertaken to understand who the different audiences are and what they might be interested in. There was some difference in perspectives between programme partners about who the key or specific stakeholders might be, but overall key audiences included:

- Green finance teams
- Scientific / academic community
- Government / policy makers including across Defra and DESNZ
- People operating grant schemes
- Wider NE, EA and FC
- Locally based ALB staff
- Nutrient Neutrality and Biodiversity Net Gain teams

[3] https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5924090708492288

- Developers
- EA teams that would benefit from using the LUCT
- Conservation practitioners and consultancies
- Land managers and green minded farmers.
- Local councils involved in developing Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS)
- National parks authorities

Less work seems to have been done on how to position outputs within the context of different audiences' work. One interviewee, for example, highlighted the importance (and lack) of understanding on how the programme fits into their work on overall emissions reduction efforts.

Policy stakeholders mentioned that not many people seem aware of what the programme is trying to do, and it was not clear who the customer for the information is. For example, the access and engagement team at Defra were said to be unaware of the programme. The diverse audience makes targeting and wide dissemination of outputs difficult but because it is crosscutting the programme does not have a natural home or specific audience.

Establishing a route for two-way communication with Defra and DESNZ has proved challenging due to several roles going unfilled including a Defra engagement role and an NE knowledge exchange role. Ongoing dialogue and contact with Defra and DESNZ, although they are not the only audience, could have helped fit the research into the departments' needs better. Members of the Steering Group and Programme Board had a key role in acting as conduits and sharing knowledge between the programme and relevant policy teams.

Enhanced early and continued engagement with policymakers through promotion of the programme as well as consideration of their policy needs could have enhanced the applicability and policy relevance of research conducted under WS2 and WS3.

Policymaker interviews indicated that the evidence generated from the programme is unlikely to influence national policy, in their opinion, for a number of reasons:

- Sample sizes were said to be small limiting generalisation across a wider area. In response, programme partners clarified that the programme was about generating better site level understanding of processes rather than representative samples for different habitat types.
- More information was said to be needed to quantify adaptation benefits, which could have been conducted as part of the partnership projects, alongside quantifying how habitats support climate mitigation. This was not included in the programme due to the explicit focus on net zero.
- Some of the findings presented at the Nature Returns conference seemed obvious and already known, for example, the finding that the 150 biggest trees store more carbon than others. The programme's research was said to be *"*reaffirming findings in context specific ways*"* (Policy stakeholder interview).

This may have been due to the conference being limited to presenting an overview of the research rather than going into detail.
- More research on the link between overall biodiversity and carbon benefits of habitats, such as hedgerows, could have increased the relevance of the research to Defra teams. Vegetation species diversity data was collected for all habitats although they are not yet available.

Whilst the programme partners did engage with policy teams during the planning process for the programme and continued some engagement with programme sponsors through board meetings and fortnightly steering group meetings this opportunity was not maximised by all involved. This was largely due to high staff turn-over within Defra and relevant new team members not being informed about the Nature Returns programme. Additionally, responsibility for the programme within Defra changed during the programme and expectations around outcomes of the programme were not clear to policy teams. Finally, the opportunity to hire a dedicated team member working on embedding knowledge from the programme within the Defra group was delayed at a critical time due to hiring restrictions and responsibility being passed from Defra to NE. If more opportunities for the programme to engage with policy teams had been maximised and fully supported by programme sponsors this could have helped to shape the research and increase its applicability.

A number of uses for the programme findings have been identified but some policy teams were unclear how they may utilise the findings at this stage.

Programme partners indicated that they hope the programme's findings will help land managers make informed decisions about how to incorporate carbon rich biodiversity habitats into the landscape through providing reliable evidence on the relative merits of different habitats. Findings from the programme may influence how we measure carbon, for example through helping to update the Woodland Carbon Code and feeding into the British Standards Institute work around carbon markets. Programme partners also expect that the findings will feed into the baseline carbon measurements and fill evidence gaps for numerous habitats which can then be used within UK modelling, e.g. modelling conducted by DESNZ.

Eight out of 11 respondents to the post-conference survey said they would take the learning forwards as a result of the conference through:
- Being stronger in calling for regulatory mechanisms to drive private sector spending on nature recovery
- Progressing plans on green finance
- Integrating findings and new approaches to delivery into their work
- Using evidence to inform advice for policy makers

Defra interviewees were less sure of how the programme's findings may be useful. Policy teams found it hard to extrapolate findings to advocate for or inform their work. The summary from the conference seemed to be that there is lots of uncertainty, context-dependence and variability, which does not help policy makers make decisions

around which habitats to prioritise. It was said, by programme partners, to be important to quantify and visualise uncertainty and natural variation.

Whether the results of the programme get used will depend on how they are disseminated and the central science division in Defra have a role to play in amplifying the programme, its aims and findings within relevant Defra groups and beyond. They are doing so by giving high-level pitches in relevant meetings such as the Net Zero Innovation Board Meeting.

Adequate time and resources were not given to plan communications and disseminate findings from the programme

The majority of thinking about communications and dissemination took place once a communications manager had been hired in Spring 2024. Several sources indicated it would have been useful to have them involved in the programme sooner. Although the Nature Returns branding was developed previously, the focus so far has been on establishing the partnership projects, conducting research, and collecting and analysing data, and has not necessarily been on public facing communications. Delays to dissemination were said to be due to delays in the research linked to earlier delays in setting up the grant scheme. That said the programme partners have tried to take advantage of opportunities for communicating about the programme where they have arisen.

As most of the outputs will not be ready until the end of the programme, it is expected that there will be little time and resources for undertaking dissemination and communications activities. Most dissemination, as thought by one programme partner, will be through scientific journals in the first instance and as such must wait for peer review before results can be more widely communicated. Overall, it is believed there have been limited time and resource within this year of the programme to conduct communications, which has led to missed opportunities to deliver against the programme's communications and dissemination objectives.

Additionally, policymakers were not always well informed. Defra were originally planning on hiring someone to build the link between Nature Returns and Defra's policy teams, but this did not go ahead due to a recruitment freeze. NE then took responsibility for hiring someone to work on embedding learning but this was delayed by Defra's recruitment freeze issue which led to recruitment being unsuccessful for the short term post. Policymakers did suggest that more effort could have been made to connect with policy teams such as those within NE. Furthermore, policy stakeholder interviewees felt that despite attendance at the steering group meetings, there was still a lack of clarity on specific planned programme outputs which made it difficult to secure continuation funding.

A draft communications plan was developed late in the programme. It is unclear whether the plan is sufficient to effectively guide communication activities.

A communications and dissemination plan has been in development during the additional year (as of December 2024 the communications and stakeholder engagement plans were recorded as being 25% complete although some stakeholders believed the plan to be well developed). The communications plan was unavailable to the evaluation team during the evaluation timeframe, therefore the content of the plan was not assessed. There was said to be little time to create a communications plan as dissemination needed to start before a plan was fully developed e.g. developing a digital presence and creating content. Without an initial schedule of outputs, the plan has had to be adapted over time.

Communications has been a standing agenda item at Steering Group meetings and is coordinated by the communications manager who brought together communications teams from the programme partner and some partnership project organisations. One partnership project organisation, despite significant reach, has not been engaged in the programme's communication work and felt this was an omission. Workshops were said to have been held with workstream leads and other key members of the programme to identify audiences, key messages and opportunities for dissemination of findings. Communications were said to be difficult to coordinate across the different ALB communications teams due to members of the communications group changing frequently and ALBs having different capacity to engage on this work. It was said that some programme partner organisations were more engaged and placed more value on the communications work than others. Overall, the dissemination activity that has been achieved is thought to have been a positive of the programme but could have been enhanced with a clearer idea of the expected outputs, increased resource and finalised strategic plan.

A draft plan for communications and dissemination beyond the end of the programme is in development and considers what can be achieved with minimal resource. It was agreed that without additional funding dissemination may occur through other channels such as RBG Kew's Nature Unlocked programme but there will likely be missed opportunities for showcasing the programme's work.

Collective learning (covering both aspects that went well and where improvements could have been made within the Nature Returns programme)

- Consider, taking into account the need to be flexible to allow for emerging findings, what the programme outputs are likely to be and how they can best be shared early on in programme development to support effective communication of the programme.

- Create a comprehensive but flexible dissemination and communications strategy at the beginning of the programme, that all partners have contributed to and agreed to be accountable to.
- Ensure early and continual communication of the programme to relevant stakeholders and policy teams to allow for their input, which could increase the utilisation of programme findings, and inspire stakeholders to communicate to their networks about the programme. Utilise user-friendly knowledge sharing methods, to ensure research objectives are relevant and outputs are in a useful format.
- For a programme this size, ensure a dissemination, knowledge exchange and communications team, which draws on resources from across the programme and delivery partner organisations, is in place early in the programme with structures/processes for planning and tracking progress. This can help to create more proactive communications.

5. Partnership project community engagement

This section details how the partnership project teams have engaged with members of their community to raise awareness of project activities, build networks and increase understanding of NbS.

Guiding evaluation questions
• In what ways have partnership projects engaged with local stakeholders such as volunteers, community groups and wider stakeholders? What approaches worked/ didn't work? For whom and why? • Have project teams reflected on current engagement and developed strategic plans for the next phase? • Have programme partners increased their understanding about local engagement and provided support?
Extent to which evaluation questions can be answered
• The first two evaluation questions listed above have been answered to the full extent with the evidence available at the time this report was written (early March 2025). • Less evidence was available to answer the question 'Have programme partners increased their understanding about local engagement and provided support?'
Strength of evidence *(for the findings presented)*
• The findings in this section are supported by interviews with each of the six partnership project leads. Most were well informed about the projects engagement activities however some felt that their engagement officer would be able to provide more sufficient answers. • Findings were generally consistent between interviewees and backed up by the programme monitoring data which was analysed through the document review process.
Research tools
• Interviews with partnership project leads (n=6) • Programme monitoring data analysis (n=25)

Key findings

- The community engagement facilitated by the partnership project organisations has been a key benefit of the Nature Returns programme in relation to the commissioned partnership projects.
- This year has provided an opportunity for partnership projects to reflect on their engagement approach and implement changes.
- The geographical context of the project influences the approach needed for effective engagement.

Evaluation results

Partnership projects have continued a wide range of community engagement activities in this year of the programme working within their local context and building on momentum from the previous years of the Nature Returns programme. The extended community engagement has been a key benefit of partnership projects within the Nature Returns programme.

Extensive and varied community engagement efforts have been key to generating support for the partnership projects from their local stakeholders. This support is vital for ensuring the projects are resilient and more likely to succeed in the long term through alignment with local priorities. Programme partners noted that the partnership projects provided a great opportunity to further understand how community engagement can be done in different contexts and bring many benefits to local communities. Some partnership projects were continuing engagement activities that pre-dated the Nature Returns programme and were able to extend these activities and add to their engagement repertoire. Other projects were starting afresh with engagement in the area where they were delivering the Nature Returns programme related NbS interventions. Engagement activities have ranged from education and awareness sessions to volunteer activities and creative workshops.

Table 5.1 below details the key stakeholder engagement activities carried out by each partnership project organisation using Nature Returns funding. Further details and analysis of engagement undertaken by each partnership project can be found in Annex 6: Partnership project case studies.

Table 5.1. Key stakeholder engagement activities carried out by partnership project organisations throughout the Nature Returns programme (**including this final year, which are highlighted in bold**).

Partnership project lead partner	Stakeholder engagement and dissemination activities (items in bold are dissemination activities from this final year)
Derbyshire Wildlife Trust	• Wooded habitat creation workshop. • **Updated Woodland Habitat Creation and Natural Flood Management toolkits to be shared at events.** • Insight event at Derby college. • Community meetings including Parish Council meetings. • School talks and tree nursery sessions. • Species Re-introduction Strategy - Development of the community engagement and education arms of the beaver reintroduction. • Postern Mill Weir Interpretation Board. • Landowner training course and publications. • Making project sites more accessible to the public. • Supporting Grindleford Parish Council Flood Group. • School workshops on natural flood management. • Attending Buxton Wild Week event to give careers advice and run an acorn planting session. **Also holding a talk about woodland creation and the Derwent Living Forests project.** • Supporting other community projects, such as Wilder Wirksworth's Maple Trust project, through advice on tree and hedge planting. • **Creation and maintenance of partnership project-specific webpages.**
Fresh Water Habitats Trust	• Community group engagement including 'GroWet' sessions where volunteers can grow and establish wetland plants. • School activities, including sowing seeds and re-potting to promote awareness of local wetland issues. • Open Farm Sunday at Waddesdon Manor. • Volunteer 'work parties' which involve volunteer assisting with habitat restoration and creation. • Creative community sessions where attendees can engage with the project through poetry or artwork. • Other volunteer activities such as Cuttleslowe greenhouse sessions which aimed to educate about plant species, care and propagation. • Hosting a 'Big Day for Nature' which is an annual event to get families together to learn about wetlands.

Partnership project lead partner	Stakeholder engagement and dissemination activities (items in bold are dissemination activities from this final year)
	• **Creation of videos to show restoration of historic floodplains and the GroWet initiative.** • **Creation of posts about the project for social media, blog posts and newsletters.** • **Creation and maintenance of partnership project-specific webpages.**
Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust	• Initial community consultation prior to work starting to discuss the project and hear opinions, which were said to be largely encouraging with only minor issues raised. • Discussion of the project at local parish meetings and plans posted on the parish website. • Members of the neighbouring village (Ashleworth) were invited to see the work being done by the project, with the ambition of them replicating some of what is being done in a field in their parish. • An ongoing volunteering group through GWT who are directly involved in project activities, largely made up of retired individuals. • Tree planting days and a major donor's event with a guided walk on the estate. • A walk and talk with 30 members of the Severn Vale Catchment Partnership, demonstrating how the Hasfield work fits within other NbS work in the area. • Hosting a local agricultural college to do some work on the site. • A talk at a wider GWT volunteer conference, attended by the CEO and Chair of Trustees, increasing internal awareness of the project. • Running a fungi survey with volunteers. • Giving a talk for Tewkesbury Friends of the Earth. • Hosting a corporate practical workday. • **Media coverage in magazines.** • **Videos shared on the Nature Returns website and through internal communications, social media and different mailing lists.** • **Creation of posts about the project for social media, blog posts and newsletters.** • **Creation and maintenance of partnership project-specific webpages.**

Partnership project lead partner	Stakeholder engagement and dissemination activities (items in bold are dissemination activities from this final year)
Groundwork NE & Cumbria	• Running an archaeological walk and a WRCC presentation with a writing group to inspire poems and stories. These will feature in an exhibition which will tour during spring 2025. • Photography walks led by a professional photographer across the estates involved in the project. These were attended by 18 individuals. Culminating in a semi-permanent photography exhibition hosted at Kirkharle Courtyard on the Little Harle estate. The launch event for the exhibition at the Wallington NT visitor centre was attended by 30 people with a further 1,200 visitors to the exhibition in the first month before the exhibition was then moved to the Little Harle estate. • Attended Bellingham Show with a poster display. 15 stakeholders actively engaged, and the project team made contacts with the public, the Lune Rivers Trust and University of York. • School visit hosted with the Country Trust visit to Eden Rivers Trust to exchange learning. • Ran an arts and crafts event for children at the NT Wallington Green Week and had a Project Exhibition there too. • Newcastle University talk given to 2nd year Geography students. This was attended by 80 students. • Attendance at agricultural shows and a Heritage Open Day. • **Creating bespoke farm reports for each farmer involved in the Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change project, showcasing monitoring data and preliminary results on the project progress in their land.** • **Development of project case study booklets aimed at a land manager audience.** • **Creating videos to show monitoring which were shared on social media.** • **Creation of posts about the project for social media, blog posts and newsletters.** • **Installation of interpretation boards.** • **Creation and maintenance of partnership project-specific webpages.**
National Trust	• Public tree planting days and tree planting with various groups including schools • School walks and talks • Giving a presentation at a parish council meeting • Hosting a visit from a local agricultural college • Talks with experts on various topics such as butterflies

Partnership project lead partner	Stakeholder engagement and dissemination activities (items in bold are dissemination activities from this final year)
	• Informal conversations with passersby (said by the volunteer group to be important in garnering local support and something that the project team did particularly well) • Sharing updates on local community Facebook groups and Parish magazines • Weekly volunteer session including volunteering swaps between Exmoor and Dartmoor • A one week “Wild Camp” for trainees from Plymouth Natural Grid, involving various volunteering activities. • Two further Wild Camps also occurred. • A whole week of free public nature events. • Attendance at two careers fairs for people aged 11-18, promoting careers in conservation • **A BBC Countryfile segment on landscape-scale nature recovery projects in Exmoor.** • **Creation of posts about the project for social media, blog posts and newsletters.** • **Installation of interpretation boards.**
Plymouth County Council	• Engaging the local community in sessions on climate action and reducing climate anxiety. • Hosting drop-in sessions in libraries aimed at families and centred around climate resilience and green spaces. • Upskilling the community with green skills facilitated by National Trust rangers. • Involving the local community in the decision making around habitat restoration and increasing public awareness of project works and the benefits of NbS. • Making project sites more accessible to the public. • Continuing existing work with Dementia Cafes and initiatives to alleviate social issues, such as loneliness. • Other activities focused on ecotherapy and wellbeing, such as the “Wild and Well” day at the community farm. • Development of a digital badges/certificates scheme in partnership with the National Trust and Poole Farm staff, attracting many young people to the farm. • Community farm bootcamps for local adult education initiatives, promoting environmental careers. • **Videos shared on the Nature Returns website and through internal communications, social media and different mailing lists.** • **Creation of posts about the project for social media, blog posts and newsletters.** • **Installation of interpretation boards.** • **Creation and maintenance of partnership project-specific webpages.**

The extended year of the programme provided an opportunity for the partnership projects to reflect on their previous approaches and try something new.

In interviews partnership project leads discussed whether and how their approach to engagement was changing in the extension year. Some of the leads identified new groups that they were aiming to engage with and strategies they were deploying to improve relationships with existing groups. For example, one partnership project team were working to improve their internal network communications based on volunteer feedback that they were not aware of the opportunity to engage in project activities.

Partnership projects have also undertaken further communications and dissemination activity in this additional year, with support from the programme.

Partnership projects were supported by the programme to disseminate findings effectively through a Communications Toolkit and Communications Clinics. Several project teams reported they were involved with the main programme communications team and felt that the ability to pool resources was a strength of the programme. Other partnership projects were unaware of communications activity. The partnership projects were said by programme partners to have provided an abundance of communication content.

Different approaches to engagement and dissemination are needed in different geographic contexts.

The geographic location and characteristics of the partnership projects varies to a high degree from the city of Plymouth with a high population density and mix of urban land uses to very rural Exmoor and Northumberland with very low population densities and a high proportion of agricultural land uses. These characteristics have an impact on the approach to stakeholder and community engagement and the definition of ‘success’ of this engagement.

Where population densities are high it is crucial to engage local residents and the wider local community to ensure support for the project and synergy with local priorities. In these areas signage can be very effective and there is potential for a large volunteer hub and high attendance at community events. Whereas in areas with very low population density engagement can focus more on engaging the local landowners to ensure synergies and understanding as they are most likely to be impacted by any work being done. Community engagement is also important but likely to be smaller in scale in terms of numbers of people attending events. This is where events such as a photography or writing walk can be very effective to engage local people in the project.

Looking to the future most partnership projects are seeking to continue their community engagement in some form, utilising their learning from the engagement activities undertaken as part of the Nature Returns programme.

The partnership projects are keen to continue their engagement work to continue providing opportunities for their local communities to engage with nature. Some partnership projects also reported that some of the connections they have made may lead to future projects and collaborations.

Collective learning (covering both aspects that went well and where improvements could have been made within the Nature Returns programme)

- Provide guidance and support, including funding, for partnership projects around communications and dissemination to enhance their efforts and ensure communications across the programme are coordinated.
- Projects such as those commissioned through the Nature Returns programme can provide strong case studies on how to implement engagement strategies to gain local support for nature recovery and identify further opportunities to support the local environment.

6. Programme collaboration

This section details how programme collaboration both internally and with external stakeholders has impacted programme success. Findings in this section occasionally refer to activities or experiences within the Nature Returns programme as a whole rather than just the final year of funding as programme collaboration is something that has built up over time.

Guiding evaluation questions
• How well have delivery organisations worked together to deliver the programme? In what circumstances did they work well together, or not and why? • What is the learning from the programme for each of the partner organisations, their ways of working and opportunities for future collaboration? • Has the understanding and capacity of programme partners improved and in what respects? • How will the project partners ensure that the knowledge and capacity built during the project is retained and embedded within their organisations?
Extent to which evaluation questions can be answered
• There is a satisfactory degree of confidence that the evaluation questions on the extent and manner of programme collaboration have been answered. • New learnings and plans for how they may be embedded are still being developed, so the associated evaluation questions can only be answered up to the most recent communications. • Questions regarding increases in knowledge and capacity of project and programme partners can only be answered for improvements which have already been recognised and communicated to the evaluation team.
Strength of evidence *(for the findings presented)*
• Evidence is not sufficient to answer all of the evaluation questions fully, but the findings are generally consistent across different respondents and methodologies providing confidence in the findings, unless otherwise stated. • Where possible, shared perspectives have been backed up by multiple sources, but since many aspects of the degree and effectiveness of collaboration are subjective, disagreement exists and has been highlighted. • Due to the semi-structured nature of interviews, some specific questions were only answered by a selection of interviewees.
Research tools
• Interviews with workstream teams, programme partners and policy stakeholders (n=18) • Programme monitoring data analysis and review of reports (n=18) • Survey (n=11) • Observational notes from attendance at events (n=2) • Follow-up communications (n=1)

Key findings

- Continuing improvements in collaboration across organisations has been a key outcome of Nature Returns (and an objective of the Shared Outcomes Fund), and it has highlighted the benefit of avoiding a siloed organisational approach.
- Although some staff felt that programme internal communication was very effective, many felt the coordination of combined outcomes across workstreams could have been better, and there was a lack of clarity on the exact activities, outputs and capabilities of each workstream and partner. Nevertheless, it was broadly felt that coordination had improved as the programme progressed, partly due to improved programme management oversight.
- Regular steering group meetings and in person events were seen as most useful for ensuring partners and policymakers were kept up to date.
- The relationship between WS1 and the partnership projects continued to improve in the final year due to increased trust and shared knowledge and experience. This enabled a more efficient and confident approach to partnership management which streamlined processes for the partnership projects.
- Partnership forums were effective at fostering knowledge exchange and partnership working between the partnership projects, and there is an appetite for continued collaboration among many of the partnership projects.
- Learning has primarily been embedded through preexisting learning pathways and mechanisms, but WS4 have made an especially strong effort to share learnings with relevant organisations.

Evaluation results

Strong internal communication was most evident when facilitated by regular steering group meetings and in-person events

The Nature Returns programme team initiated informal discussions, specific project meetings, regular steering group meetings and liaison through bespoke communications to keep partners up-to-date and involved in decision-making. According to interviews with programme partners, the meetings tended to not be over-formalised, but with a clear agenda.

Both the various workstreams and the partnership projects commented on the value of in-person events and face-to-face meetings, as they strengthen relationships, offer the opportunity for more informal spontaneous conversations and inquiry, and maximise potential for knowledge exchange. For the partnership projects, although both face-to-face and online meetings were reported to cover a broad range of topics, in-person events and site visits were found to be particularly valuable, as it allowed them to get a clearer picture of the breadth of activities and the local context at each site. For

programme partners, face-to-face meetings with partnership projects helped develop working relationships. Interviewees did acknowledge that in-person meetings take significantly more time and money, particularly due to the geographical spread of partnership projects.

The regular steering group meetings have enhanced the way in which workstreams work together. Several programme partners commented on the utility of the steering group meetings, in which partners were able to build relationships, make decisions quickly and build understanding of different partners' work.

Improved trust and shared knowledge between programme management and partnership projects has enabled a more relaxed and adaptive management approach

Several of the partnership projects mentioned how their relationship with programme management (WS1) had improved since the previous year. Heightened feelings of trust between them were reported, partly due to successful delivery the previous year. In one case this allowed former disagreements between specialists from different organisations over approaches to habitat restoration to be settled and compromises reached, and a stronger relationship between partnership project and programme partners formed as a result.

A sense of smoother partnership project management was reported as a result of the improved relationship with WS1. One partnership project interviewee mentioned in an interview how they felt the reporting burden had been reduced from the *"*quite onerous*"* level the previous year without compromising on the amount of useful information conveyed. One partnership project, however, found the level of scrutiny on project spending to be excessive, with high levels of evidence required to support claims forms (standard Defra group commercial requirements). It was suggested that the funding structure could be streamlined as it was difficult to move money around between sites, which was sometimes necessary to avoid certain obstacles such as archaeological sites. Nevertheless, it was conceded the spending scrutiny was *"*relatively painless*"* and simpler than other schemes such as Countryside Stewardship (partnership project interview).

WS1 reflected on the benefit of maintaining good relationships with the partnership projects in order to ensure good communication. They noted how these relationships take time to build, and given staff changes, a network of strong points-of-contact needed to be built and some degree of staff continuity maintained, so as to make handovers easier. From the perspective of the partnership projects, programme management were seen as good communicators, always letting them know when they were around and available to meet in-person.

Effective cross-organisational working in Nature Returns helped ensure that individual organisational visions were aligned and complementary across ALBs

and some NGOs, and that government capacity was maximised through collaboration and communication

Workstream interviewees stated how working across partner organisations is often not prioritised due to the amount of time that needs to be budgeted for the additional levels of communication, but the extra effort is worth it when synergies can be identified. Further, a siloed organisational approach is counter-productive since the direction of travel and messaging is often so similar, especially between NE and the EA.

Nature Returns partners have worked together since programme initiation, identifying ways to improve administrative efficiency by playing to each organisation's strengths. They have continued to build collaborative capacity in 2024/2025, such as through feeding into the cross-organisational working group on green finance. One of the partnership project organisations mentioned how they now had a stronger sense that they were working in partnership with ALBs and towards the same objectives, both through collaborative working throughout Nature Returns and other ties between the organisations.

The FC are experienced in cross-organisational working, and they commented that the collaboration across partners in Nature Returns was especially good due to the shared interest in carbon sequestration and storage. DESNZ policymakers were particularly interested in how the programme had managed to bridge various ALBs, fostering collaboration, aligning organisational objectives under a wider government vision and building government capacity. One respondent from the Nature Returns conference survey said it was a "fantastic collaborative programme tackling very difficult challenges and bringing disparate work areas together".

Programme integration and internal awareness has improved, but some issues with internal communication persist and some opportunities are being missed due to siloed day-to-day working between workstreams

There were varying opinions on the level of internal communication and integration within Nature Returns, although most agreed it had improved towards the end of the programme. This was partly thanks to the practice of having a WS1 staff member in an oversight position across all partnership projects and programme partners, as this improved continuity of communication and offered background knowledge in the event of any staff changes. Internal awareness also improved through continued meetings, dissemination of outputs and improved relationships, allowing teams to better understand each other's functions and benefits. In recent months, workstreams reported that there has also been lots of work to develop cross-workstream insights, although they noted that this could probably have been done sooner.

Some workstream interviewees felt that internal communication could have been better, as they were not always aware what the other teams were doing. Additionally, some policy stakeholders had the perception that the workstreams were quite

disparate. The FC felt particularly disconnected due to the lack of their designation as a separate workstream, which led to feelings that their part in the programme was not always recognised.

One workstream lead explained how despite the existence of some cross-cutting work, the workstreams were set-up to be largely self-contained in their day-to-day work. They reflected that a stronger focus on combined outcomes across workstreams could have been beneficial, for example around carbon pricing and offsetting work across WS2 and WS4.

One of the primary disruptors of programme coordination (across the whole of the Nature Returns programme, not just the final year) was the high staff turnover at NE, causing stress and increasing workload particularly in regard to the reporting work within the NE team. When the programme manager left, the void led to a loss of momentum and the drifting apart of the workstreams as they had a reduction in capacity to stay fully up to date with each other. Staffing issues within one workstream reported in July 2024 meant that they were relying on volunteers from other teams and partnership projects to help with the workload. At the time, they reported there was *"*no flexibility in resourcing*"* (July 2024 workstream update). When staff were replaced, it also meant more time had to be spent building new relationships. However, as mentioned previously, continuity of relationships with other staff members helped to mitigate some of the issues associated with handovers.

Facilitation of partnership project knowledge exchange has raised confidence, catalysed collaboration and contributed towards refinement of intervention approach

In the 12th of June workshop in 2024, participants highlighted that positive outcomes can be maximised through effective collaboration, and the partnership projects later pointed to the wealth of opportunities which have been created to engage the projects with each other through meetings, site visits and workshops. They have largely found the partnership working and knowledge exchange very useful to build confidence and learn from each other's approaches.

WS1's confidence in holding the partnership forums has increased, and partnership projects have responded with very positive feedback. The forums included many opportunities to exchange knowledge and learn and entailed presentations and interactive activities with high levels of engagement from the projects. They were found to be helpful and informative, and WS1 noticed their value in facilitating cross-partnership collaboration. One partnership project said they found the Derby forum in October 2024 useful for learning about the emerging WS2 findings, as this reassured them of the scientific impact that their work was having.

Enthusiasm to collaborate has increased as the programme has progressed and there have been several instances of collaborative working between partnership projects

over the past year. These instances have included exchanging guidance on various approaches to habitat delivery and learning from others' experiences; discussing joint communications; and holding reciprocal site visits. Several projects talked about how they would like more cross-partnership engagement and would like there to be a forum for continued collaboration post-March 2025. One suggested that regular updates and collation of data across partnership projects to flag successful interventions and similar activities would have created partnership working opportunities and improved engagement.

However, one project acknowledged that although there was therapeutic value in sharing problems, from their point of view the diversity of the partnerships limited the scope to learn from one another. They suggested that cross-partnership engagement was most useful either when aspects of project scope were similar or when there were opportunities for partnership working.

Attendance at steering group meetings alongside internal and cross-organisational relations was key to policy alignment and influence

Programme sponsors mentioned how they kept up to date with Nature Returns through attendance at steering group and programme board meetings. These were supplemented by specific policy meetings and ad hoc catchups. They found that this approach worked reasonably well and referenced the transparency of the meetings and opportunities for a range of people with different experience to discuss issues and suggest solutions. However, Defra representatives on the steering group changed five times, although the impact of such changes is unknown, and there was said to be poor attendance from Defra on the programme board.

In the workshop on the 12th of June 2024, it was mentioned that there had been significant programme reach due to the extent of collaboration between different organisations. This reach seems to have been particularly impactful in regard to WS4. WS4 have run several presentations across the EA, the Local Investment Leads network within NE and also to catchment coordinators and Defra. Members of WS4 have been in conversation with the Defra Green Finance and Systems Teams about landscape-scale, place-based approaches to support a regenerative economic model for green finance. The WS4 lead also wrote a blurb about the programme for a Defra briefing note to Minister Hardy, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Water and Flooding. FC personnel reported that they have been talking about the programme frequently within their organisation, and it is broadly known within their policy team of around 60-70 people, to whom they have been promoting the green finance webinars and reports. They also mentioned that they inform Forest Research of any work which they believe to be relevant to them. Additionally, they informed the evaluation team that the Nature Markets Community of Interest group discuss the green finance work.

Despite the lack of specific internal learning strategies in some of the workstreams, learning has been embedded and disseminated within partnership organisations to some extent through the development of various outputs and learning pathways

In interviews in January 2025, several workstreams shared that although they have not yet produced a specific workstream learning strategy, internal learning is always ongoing within the partner organisations. Established internal learning pathways exist both within NE and to the wider conservation community, through which NE teams plan to share their learnings. NE interviewees suggested learning could be incorporated into existing training. RBG Kew also have internal learning mechanisms, and plan on incorporating the learning from Nature Returns into future grant writing.

WS2 have been involved with activities to embed learning within other programme partners to build capacity. For example, in interview in January 2025, the FC mentioned how someone from WS2 was planning on giving a talk to their Carbon Champions, who are part of the area teams championing the Woodland Carbon Code. Furthermore, they have helped some of the partnership projects to develop their own monitoring programmes, building capabilities within those organisations.

WS4 have also utilised other methods to embed learning both with programme partners and other teams in the associated ALBs. For example, through running the Action Learning Webinar series which directly utilised research commissioned earlier in the programme. Further details of the Action Learning Webinar series and other WS4 activities can be found in Section 3: 3. Blended funding. Additionally, WS4 noted that Defra's green finance department as a whole is looking at how learning from Nature Returns can be embedded in their service and other relevant programmes.

There is appetite for future collaboration between partners and between partnership projects, and although some relationship will be sustained due to outstanding dissemination, continued monitoring activities and pipeline project alignment, many plans are contingent on funding

Interviews suggested RBG Kew are likely to continue working with NE in some capacity since they have similar projects ongoing within both organisations. Kew also have lots of other work linked to the FC and Forest Research. However, the specific plans involving continued collaboration which have been discussed in relation to Nature Returns are largely contingent on the availability of funding.

There is fairly widespread desire within the partnership projects for continued collaboration. Naturally, some degree of this may occur without direct involvement from NE. For example, Derbyshire Wildlife Trust are already discussing the potential of another knowledge exchange trip to the National Trust's Exmoor site following the success of the first one. Notwithstanding, WS1 announced that they launched the Digital Hub and the Partnership Projects SharePoint site in November 2024, the latter

after repeated requests from the partnership projects and suggestions from within the NE teams. This will facilitate continued partnership project interaction and knowledge exchange post-March 2025.

WS1 shared with the evaluation team that a workshop has been planned in March 2025 to discuss continued collaboration once the programme comes to a close, but regardless, a long-term relationship will exist due to the ten-year commitment to monitoring of partnership project sites and collaboration will continue as partners work together on the outstanding dissemination of findings.

Collective learning (covering both aspects that went well and where improvements could have been made within the Nature Returns programme)

- Developing partnerships takes time, but this is vital to ensuring good internal communication between partners. Having a network of regular points of contact can help to keep partners up-to-date and facilitate easier handovers in the event of staff changes. Face-to-face meetings and regular steering group meetings, although not always transferable, are most valuable for achieving this aim.
- Effective collaboration through partnership working and knowledge exchange across programme partners can maximise positive outcomes if synergies can be identified. This can be facilitated through comprehensive oversight from programme management and regular updates on progress and successes.
- Webinars are a particularly useful as a relatively easy medium for sharing learnings.
- Potential grant recipients should flag key risks and highlight strengths within their applications, as some can take more time to work with and bring different challenges. This also allows for consideration of where grant recipients can be linked up to help each other overcome challenges.
- It is important for workstream responsibilities along with the associated expected activities, outputs and timelines to be mapped out early in the planning process. This plan should be stored by programme management in a master document which also details dependencies and resourcing, with each workstream owning a more detailed breakdown of their specific section. This would simplify reallocation of resources, re-delegation of tasks and enable the identification of cross-cutting tasks which partners can collaborate on.
- Due to the similar direction of travel and messaging across ALBs such as the EA, NE and the FC, it is counter-productive to take a siloed organisational approach, and it is often worth the additional effort needed to allocate time to communicate aims and find synergies between organisations' objectives and activities.

7. Cross cutting

This section explores learning from across the programme and how this has shaped programme activities over time and planning for the programme beyond its end.

Guiding evaluation questions
• What lessons have been learned, by whom and how, from delivering the partnership projects and the programme as a whole? • To what extent, how and in what circumstances have these lessons influenced delivery of the programme? • Were there positive or negative unintended consequences resulting from the programme? Who was affected, in what ways and why? • What is the legacy of the programme and how have partners established this during the programme?
Extent to which evaluation questions can be answered
• The evidence base on lessons learnt is fairly large with multiple perspectives from all programme partners and partnership project leads. Given time constraints, detail into each of these lessons is not presented here • There is a low degree of confidence that the evaluation questions in terms of the programme's legacy have been answered due to little information on this.
Strength of evidence *(for the findings presented)*
• Evidence is not sufficient to answer all of the evaluation questions fully, and the findings were varied across different respondents. • Findings reported are largely supported by one or two sources, particularly lessons learnt. • There is less consensus on what will happen in the future to ensure outputs of the programme are beneficial.
Research tools
• Interviews with workstream teams and programme partners (n=18) • Programme monitoring data analysis (n=30) • Face-to-face workshops (n=2) • Survey (n=37)

Key findings

- Lessons learned have been broad and numerous relating to both scientific findings as well as best practice that can be taken forwards for similar programmes and projects.
- The programme has been, in some instances, responsive and adaptable, where difficulties faced have led to changes in the focus of the workstreams or the ways in which the programme is run.

- There has been less adaptation of the programme over time with regards to effectively communicating the programme's learning and setting up the legacy of the programme. Failure to maximise the impact of the programme mean overall programme objectives to contribute to delivery of net zero may not be met as a result.

Evaluation results

One of the programme's greatest achievements has been the amount and diversity of learning generated across partners and organisations

For the programme as a whole, understanding has been built on all of the factors involved in creating NbS including ecological, financial and social such as local engagement and bringing in local knowledge. Learning has been generated on:

- how to manage and conduct habitat creation and restoration,
- how to go about collecting and analysing carbon and other data,
- how carbon is stored in particular habitats over time,
- the use and development of new methodologies,
- the state of and best approaches to blended funding and
- the implementation and running of the programme itself.

This learning that programme partners and partnership projects have amassed from the programme, including ways in which future similar programmes could be improved, is summarised in the following points:

Learning from implementation of the programme:

- Facilitating and supporting collaboration between programme partners takes time and depends on effective relationship building
- Monitoring and evaluation should be incorporated into the programme early on
- Diversity in the team is needed to include technical and science skills alongside management and coordination skills
- For a programme with multiple partners and multiple discreet workstreams, these workstreams and their intersections should be mapped at the outset
- Planning and coordination of programme reporting (i.e. to Treasury), is needed from the outset to ensure reporting schedules align
- Values led leadership and transparent project planning, and management provides a safe space to take risks and allows partners to learn and grow together

- Early and ongoing engagement with policy teams is key to ensuring relevance and useability of programme findings in a fast-paced nature policy landscape
- A targeted but flexible communications and engagement strategy is needed to share findings and achieve impact
- Clear communication and scheduling of project outputs over the course of the programme may aid stakeholder engagement

Learning from implementation of the partnership projects:

- Ultimate goals of the projects will not be realised within the timeframe of the funding and long-term funding and/or investment is needed to generate long-term research and delivery
- Flexibility and adaptability must be built in to accommodate little control over natural processes and the unpredictability of working with land managers and owners
- Delivering scientific research and habitat change on the ground side by side can and does work, particularly where time is put into building effective relationships with local land management teams. Effectively co-ordinating timings of habitat works and scientific monitoring can be challenging but is achievable.
- Providing capital restoration costs and management costs upfront means funding is more flexible and attractive to landowners
- Build in processes for monitoring project impacts into the future
- Awarding of grants for creation and restoration works need to be well-timed, working backwards from realistic planting times
- Restoration projects need to be multi-year to allow for planning and seasonality
- Communicating changes in land use to the wider community to reduce fear and increase buy-in, this is particularly effective when working to address local challenges, e.g. natural flood management measures to decrease flood risk
- Having access to central support brings many advantages for local projects
- Providing opportunities for partnership projects to show off their work and share learning (face to face) has proved to be a positive experience. Provision of ongoing mechanisms and forums for sharing project learning (beyond the funded period) would be beneficial
- Team energy and determination are important to overcome challenges
- Resources allocated to community engagement may be greater than expected, particularly where engagement and facilitation skills need to be brought in

- Different approaches are needed in different places and different types of projects have different merits. For example, NT have the power to act so they can act quicker
- Intermediaries are harder to work with, but their reach can be further
- As funding comes to an end and staff leave, plans need to be made to retain and share their knowledge

For further details of the programmes main findings see the Nature Returns Summary Report.

Lessons learned have influenced delivery of the programme

Several instances indicate that modifications or improvements have been made to the programme in response to learning:

- More face-to-face meetings and workshops have been organised in light of their success in bringing partners together and sharing knowledge.
- These face-to-face meetings have in some cases captured and synthesised lessons learnt.
- The reporting format was modified based on feedback from partnership projects to make it easier.
- WS4's approach has evolved to reflect increasing market knowledge about green finance.
- Recommendations from the previous evaluation phase have been taken into account in some ways, for example, increased interaction with partnership projects has been supported through various events and resources in this additional year, but not in others. For example, leaving adequate time to effectively plan and conduct dissemination and engagement do not seem to have been considered.

Unexpected benefits of the programme such as additional projects the programme has led to, for example an assessment of the needs around green finance knowledge led by EA, and, due to the creation of baseline data, an expectation that partnership projects are better set up to receive further research funding.

The legacy of the programme (i.e. how learning will be taken forwards by different people) remains unclear and, although discussions around the legacy have taken place between programme and delivery partners, a clear plan has not been finalised.

The actions that need to be taken to secure the programme's legacy, as discussed at a face-to-face workshop in June 2024, are:

- Collaborating to develop strategic funding plans and to implement best practice
- Upskilling communities and teams so they can continue on the work
- Grow partnership project understanding, through the action learning series, of how to link delivery to finance so they can continue exploration beyond the programme period

- Ensure all information generated has been captured
- Effectively communicate the programme's key messages widely
- Share evidence and metrics with relevant stakeholders
- Raise the profile of the programme with policymakers
- Investigate long-term funding opportunities

The biggest challenge to securing the programme's legacy was said to be funding, as data needs to be collected over the longer term. Essential to the legacy is showcasing change over time at the sites and measuring carbon in habitats over time as well as helping to maintain the network of partnership projects to spread learning and best practice. An additional risk to the legacy is the loss of staff and their knowledge as the programme and projects come to an end. Actions being taken to secure the legacy were said to include the creation of manuals, reporting, hosting and attending conferences and talking with policy teams.

Collective learning (covering both aspects that went well and where improvements could have been made within the Nature Returns programme)

- Learning from the programme on best practice and on the challenges of implementing multi-partner programmes, undertaking carbon scientific research, conducting research on and helping partners to explore blended funding opportunities, and navigating government grant processes should be captured and shared widely.
- Steps need to be taken to ensure monitoring data from the programme are stored and able to be shared.
- Connections between partnership projects should be supported, where possible, and monitoring should continue periodically for the remainder of the project's 10 years habitat maintenance funding. A lack of monitoring to capture carbon and biodiversity effects over time would undermine the objectives of the project.

8. Conclusions

Overall, the Nature Returns programme has generated a great deal of learning and evidence around carbon sequestration and storage in different habitats above and below ground, the implementation of NbS and blended funding. A significant amount of habitat creation and restoration has been undertaken along with meaningful engagement with local communities by the partnership projects. The evidence indicates that more outcomes from the programme will be seen as outputs are produced and habitat interventions mature.

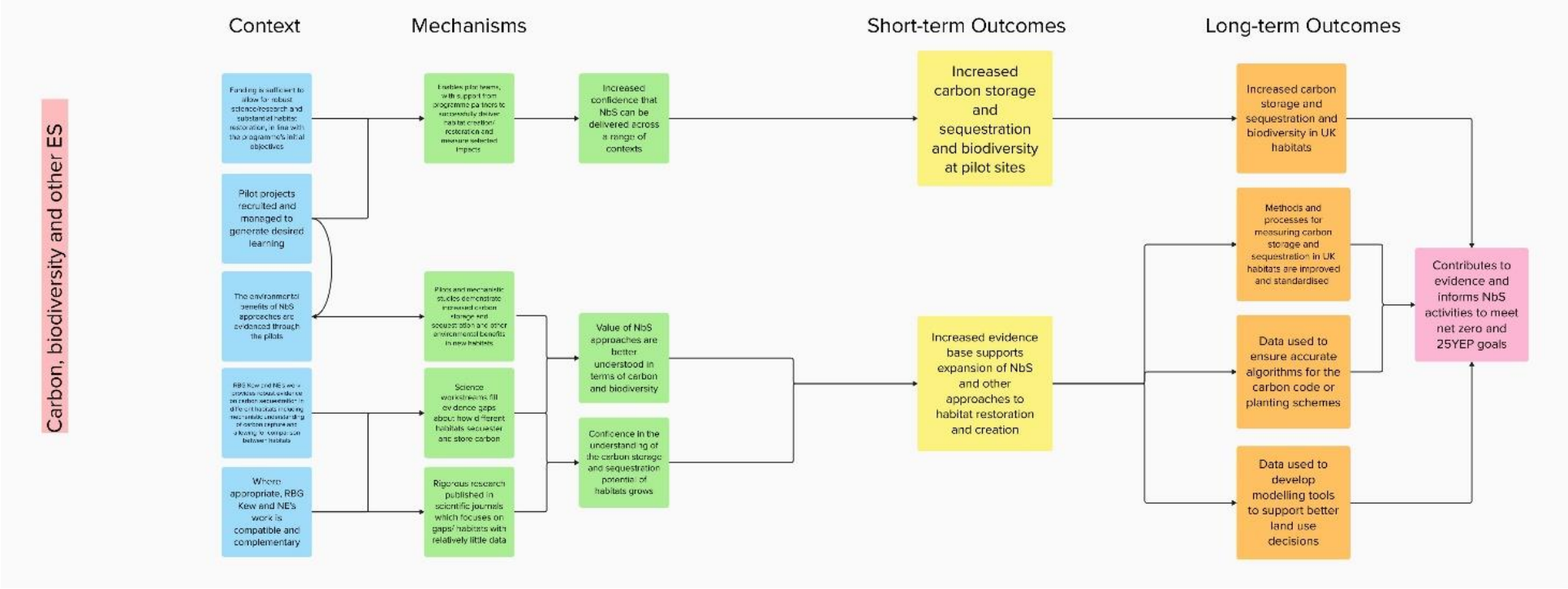
Delays in earlier periods of the programme caused by delayed procurement of funding continued to impact progress within the programme, particularly for WS2 in baselining the partnership project sites. Despite the delays, significant progress was made, and partnership projects were largely able to fulfil their commitments in delivering NbS.

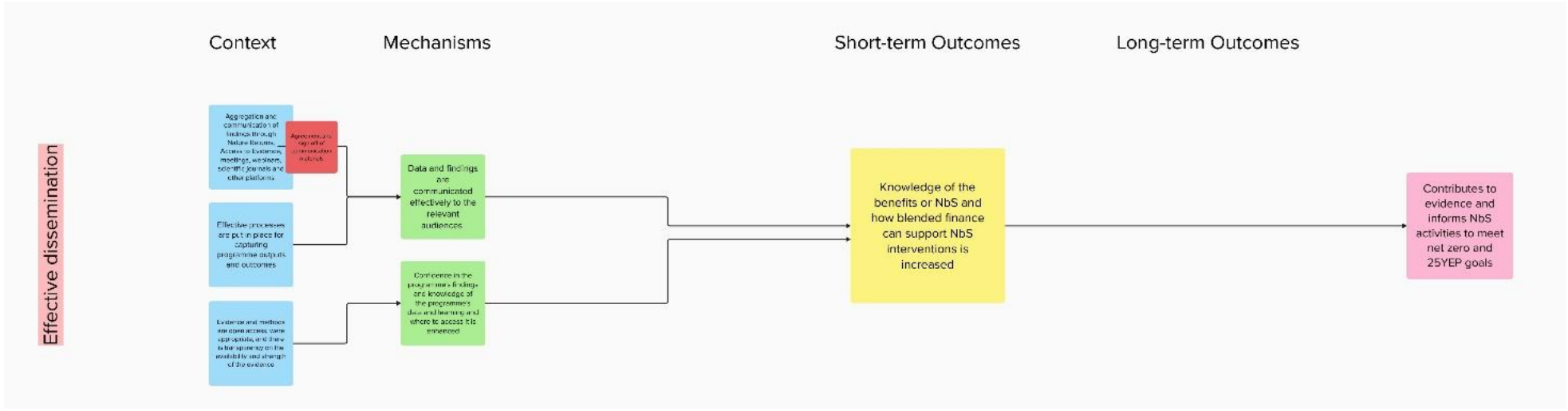
The programme was able to showcase how cross-ALB working can be successful in delivering for nature and utilising the skills and knowledge of each organisation. Regular meetings throughout the programme, including a mix of online and in-person formats helped to form strong trusting relationships and progress the programme forward. Additionally, partnership project forum events helped to create networks across nature related eNGOs, enabling knowledge sharing. However, changing of programme management multiple times throughout the programme slowed progress and somewhat impeded planning of aspects such as strategic dissemination and policy engagement. There were a number of missed opportunities around engaging with key policy teams across Defra and NE throughout the course of the programme to ensure alignment to produce policy-relevant outputs. These missed opportunities could have helped to maximise the relevance of the research and share the learning amassed, increasing the programme's impact overall.

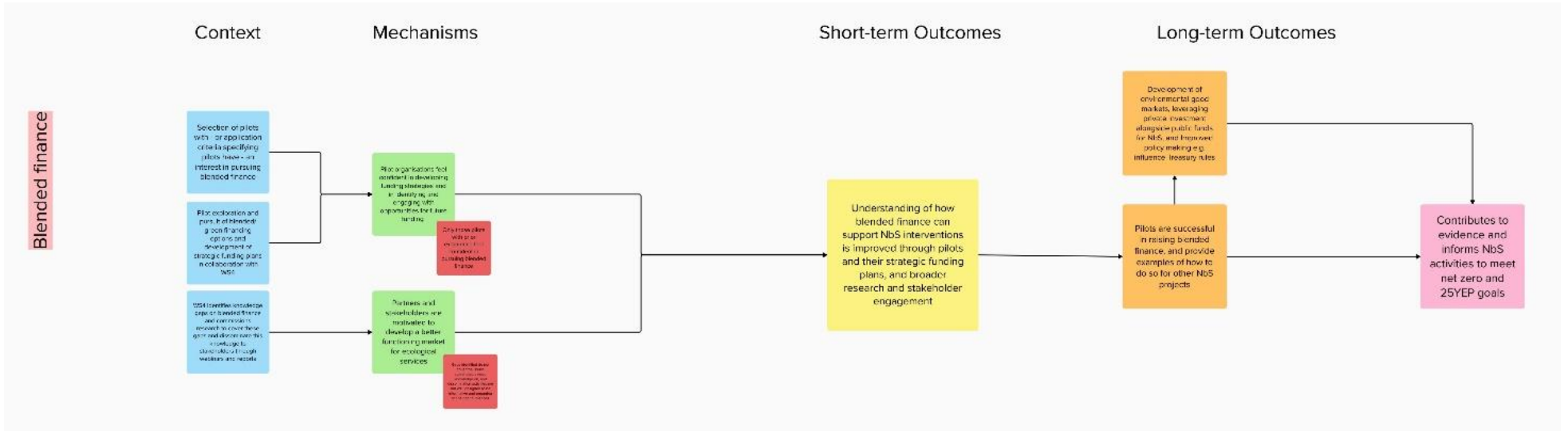
Future programmes should ensure strong programme management throughout. Where policy influence is an aim, there should be thorough and frequent engagement with all relevant policy teams to ensure the most pressing evidence gaps are being covered and sufficient cohesion with other similar programmes, e.g. on methodologies being used. Initial programme design was a collaborative effort between policy and delivery organisations. Ongoing engagement needs commitment from all parties and to take into account the changing policy landscape and changes to policy teams. Future work should take learning from the programme's engagement with the partnership projects through both WS2 and WS4's work and the partnership project forums, as these approaches have showcased positive ways for a large programme to facilitate relationship building and knowledge exchange with local level projects.

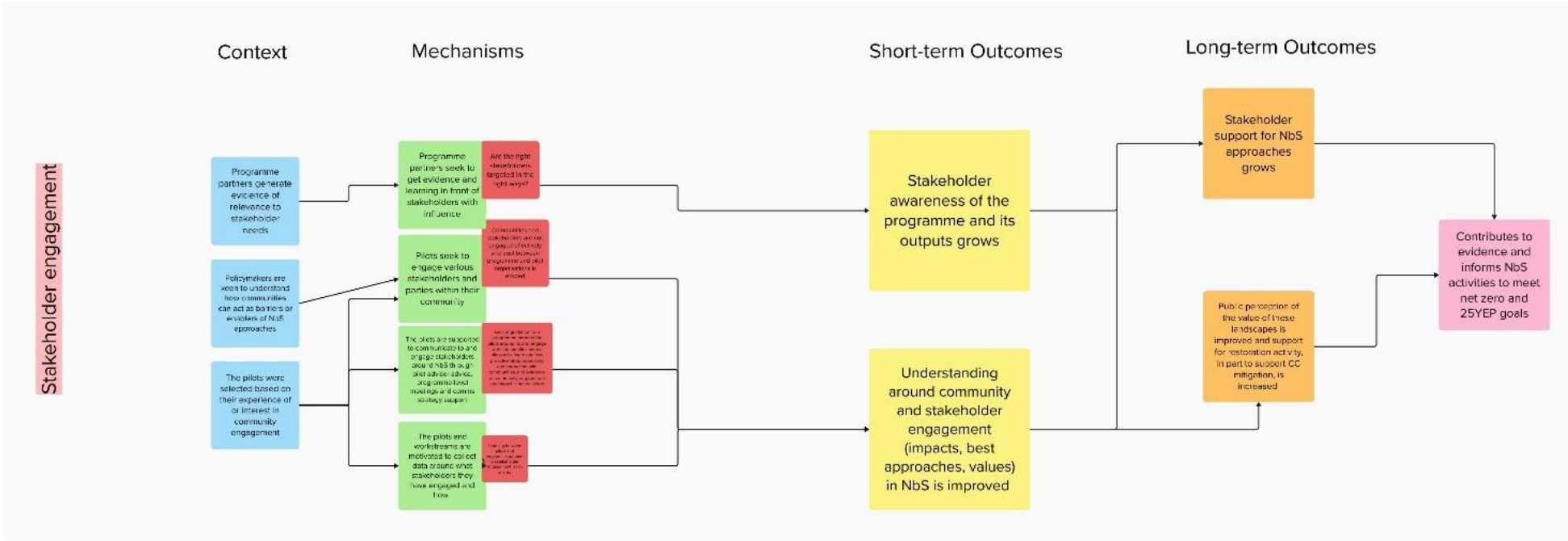
Annex 1: Theory of Change and evaluation questions

A full programme Theory of Change can be found at : Nature Returns ToC/CMO • ICF Europe & Asia (mural.co). The TOC is divided here by programme work areas/themes for easier viewing but doesn't show links between work areas. The evaluation questions guiding this and subsequent phases of evaluation of the programme are shown below.




Context
Mechanisms
Short-term Outcomes
Long-term Outcomes
Effective dissemination
Data and findings are communicated effectively to the relevant audiences
Knowledge of the benefits or NbS and how blended finance can support NbS interventions is increased
Contributes to evidence and informs NbS activities to meet net zero and 25YEP goals


Context
Mechanisms
Short-term Outcomes
Long-term Outcomes
Blended finance
Understanding of how blended finance can support NbS interventions is improved through pilots and their strategic funding plans, and broader research and stakeholder engagement
Pilots are successful in raising blended finance, and provide examples of how to do so for other NbS projects
Contributes to evidence and informs NbS activities to meet net zero and 25YEP goals


Stakeholder engagement
Context
Mechanisms
Short-term Outcomes
Long-term Outcomes
Programme partners generate evidence of relevance to stakeholder needs
Policymakers are keen to understand how communities can act as barriers or enablers of NbS approaches
The pilots were selected based on their experience of or interest in community engagement
Programme partners seek to get evidence and learning in front of stakeholders with influence
Are the right stakeholders targeted in the right ways?
Pilots seek to engage various stakeholders and parties within their community
The pilots are supported to communicate to and engage stakeholders around NbS through pilot advocacy advice, programme-level messaging and comms strategy support
The pilots and workstreams are motivated to collect data around what stakeholders they have engaged and how
Stakeholder awareness of the programme and its outputs grows
Understanding around community and stakeholder engagement (impacts, best approaches, values) in NbS is improved
Stakeholder support for NbS approaches grows
Public perception of the value of these landscapes is improved and support for restoration activity, in part to support CC mitigation, is increased
Contributes to evidence and informs NbS activities to meet net zero and 25YEP goals

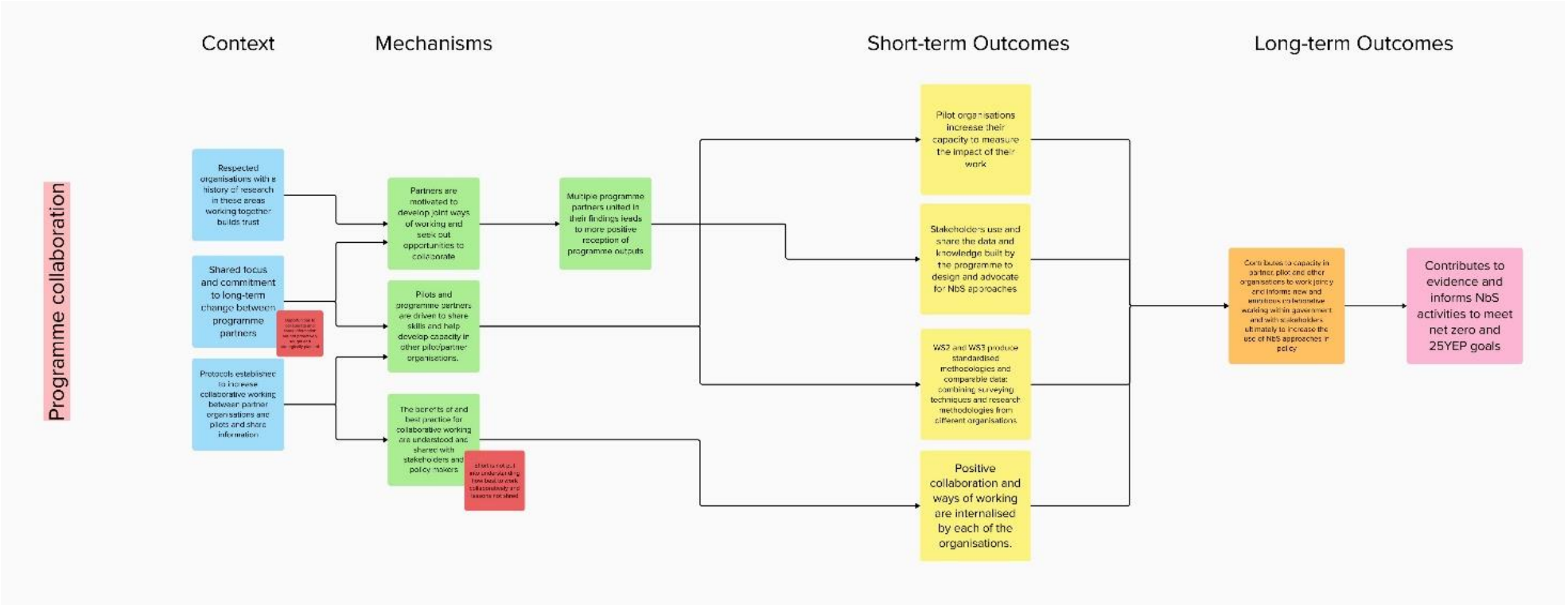


Figure A 1. Programme Theory of Change diagrams divided by themes.

Table A 1. Evaluation questions.

CMO	Process evaluation questions	Short-term impact evaluation questions	Long-term impact evaluation questions
Carbon, biodiversity and other ecosystem services	Do the pilots represent an appropriate basis for testing NbS for climate change at the landscape scale? Why/ why not? In what circumstances and for whom?	What scientific methods/protocols have been developed, and which are scalable / applicable in different contexts and timescales? To what extent and in what ways are each of the scientific methods and protocols of the programme likely to be scalable and applicable to different contexts?	What are the expected carbon storage and sequestration, biodiversity and other environmental outcomes of the pilots and programme in different locations and habitats? a) What actions in what contexts have been most effective in terms of delivering environmental benefits and why? b) How do environmental outcomes of the pilots vary across locations and habitats? What actions in what contexts have been most effective in terms of outcomes and why? What learning has been gained, by whom and how? c) To what extent and how has the programme been successful in increasing the quality and/or quantity of natural capital assets within each pilot area? d) To what extent and how have the scientific objectives of the pilots and programme been achieved? To what extent and in what ways are each of the scientific methods and protocols of the programme likely to be scalable and applicable to different contexts?

CMO	Process evaluation questions	Short-term impact evaluation questions	Long-term impact evaluation questions
Carbon, biodiversity and other ecosystem services	To what extent, why and how have the activities in WS2 and 3 led to data collection on carbon storage and sequestration? Did their activities go to plan? Was data collection possible along the desired timeline? Did the resolution and methods of the sampling meet the goals of the research?	What short-term impacts has the carbon science from WS2 and 3 had? Who has benefitted from this?	What are the expected carbon storage and sequestration, biodiversity and other environmental outcomes of the pilots and programme in different locations and habitats? a) What actions in what contexts have been most effective in terms of delivering environmental benefits and why? b) How do environmental outcomes of the pilots vary across locations and habitats? What actions in what contexts have been most effective in terms of outcomes and why? What learning has been gained, by whom and how? c) To what extent and how has the programme been successful in increasing the quality and/or quantity of natural capital assets within each pilot area? d) To what extent and how have the scientific objectives of the pilots and programme been achieved? To what extent and in what ways are each of the scientific methods and protocols of the programme likely to be scalable and applicable to different contexts?

CMO	Process evaluation questions	Short-term impact evaluation questions	Long-term impact evaluation questions
Carbon, biodiversity and other ecosystem services	To what extent, how and what circumstances have pilots achieved the proposed habitat changes? What approaches are being used to measure changes? (carbon, biodiversity, ecosystem services)	What short-term impacts have resulted from the habitat creation and restoration created by the pilot projects? Who has benefitted from this?	What are the expected carbon storage and sequestration, biodiversity and other environmental outcomes of the pilots and programme in different locations and habitats? a) What actions in what contexts have been most effective in terms of delivering environmental benefits and why? b) How do environmental outcomes of the pilots vary across locations and habitats? What actions in what contexts have been most effective in terms of outcomes and why? What learning has been gained, by whom and how? c) To what extent and how has the programme been successful in increasing the quality and/or quantity of natural capital assets within each pilot area? d) To what extent and how have the scientific objectives of the pilots and programme been achieved? To what extent and in what ways are each of the scientific methods and protocols of the programme likely to be scalable and applicable to different contexts?
Effective dissemination	To what extent has learning from the programme and pilots been effectively disseminated? What approaches worked, for whom and why? Who has benefitted from this communication?	To what extent has the learning shared by the programme been utilised by different audiences?	To what extent, how and for whom has the learning and knowledge shared led to an increase in NbS approaches? a) To what extent and how has the evidence generated by the programme led to an increase in support for NbS approaches in policy and practice?

CMO	Process evaluation questions	Short-term impact evaluation questions	Long-term impact evaluation questions
Blended finance	How well have the project partners engaged private investors in the work? What approaches worked for whom, and why?	To what extent has the evidence generated by WS4 enabled the pilots to develop strategic funding plans? How are these going to be implemented?	To what extent, how and for whom have the financial and governance models trialed by the programme been effective in delivering blended finance approaches to funding NbS? a) To what extent and how has the evidence generated by the pilots informed investors and policymakers on preferred models to fund NbS? b) To what extent and how has the evidence generated by NE, Kew and the pilots increased the confidence of private investors to fund NbS? c) To what extent and how has the evidence generated by the pilots identified effective ways for Govt to work with others to fund and manage NbS?
Blended finance	To what extent, how and in what circumstances have delivery organisations involved in the programme increased their understanding of (and capability in) blended finance?	To what extent, how and for whom have blended finance knowledge gaps been filled by programme blended finance activities?	To what extent, how and for whom have the financial and governance models trailed by the programme been effective in delivering blended finance approaches to funding NbS? a) To what extent and how has the evidence generated by the pilots informed investors and policymakers on preferred models to fund NbS? b) To what extent and how has the evidence generated by NE, Kew and the pilots increased the confidence of private investors to fund NbS? c) To what extent and how has the evidence generated by the pilots identified effective ways for Govt to work with others to fund and manage NbS?

Stakeholder engagement	In what ways have pilots engaged with local landowners both directly and indirectly involved in the pilot (where appropriate to pilot structure)? What approaches worked/ didn't work? For whom and why?	To what extent and how have the pilots been successful in engaging and building relationships with local communities (increasing social capital) and wider stakeholders?	To what extent, how and in what circumstances have stakeholders participated in the programme and pilots, and obtained social, economic and environmental benefits? a) To what extent and how has the evidence generated by the pilots and programme informed local and wider stakeholders about NbS? b) What are the social, economic and environmental outcomes of the pilots, who are the key beneficiaries and how were the outcomes achieved? c) How, why and in what circumstances have evidence and knowledge shared by the programme with stakeholders led to a change in behaviour?
Stakeholder engagement	In what ways have pilots engaged with local stakeholders such as volunteers, community groups and wider stakeholders? What approaches worked/ didn't work? For whom and why?	In what ways have communities affected (either positively or negatively) delivery of the pilots, how?	To what extent, how and in what circumstances have stakeholders participated in the programme and pilots, and obtained social, economic and environmental benefits? a) To what extent and how has the evidence generated by the pilots and programme informed local and wider stakeholders about NbS? b) What are the social, economic and environmental outcomes of the pilots, who are the key beneficiaries and how were the outcomes achieved? c) How, why and in what circumstances have evidence and knowledge shared by the programme with stakeholders led to a change in behaviour?

Stakeholder engagement	In what ways have programme partners engaged with stakeholders such as policy makers, researchers and investors? What approaches worked/ didn't work? For whom and why?	To what extent and how have programme partners been successful in engaging and building relationships with wider stakeholders?	To what extent, how and in what circumstances have stakeholders participated in the programme and pilots, and obtained social, economic and environmental benefits? a) To what extent and how has the evidence generated by the pilots and programme informed local and wider stakeholders about NbS? b) What are the social, economic and environmental outcomes of the pilots, who are the key beneficiaries and how were the outcomes achieved? c) How, why and in what circumstances have evidence and knowledge shared by the programme with stakeholders led to a change in behaviour?
Programme collaboration	How well have delivery organisations worked together to deliver the programme? In what circumstances did they work well together, or not and why?	What is the learning from the programme for each of the partner organisations, their ways of working and opportunities for future collaboration?	Can the learning around the governance, funding and science elements of the programme be scaled up and rolled out more widely, to whom, and in what ways? a) Has the understanding and capacity of project partners improved and in what respects? b) How will the project partners ensure that the knowledge and capacity built during the project is retained and embedded within their organisations? c) How can learning be applied to future schemes?

Programme collaboration	Was the process for recruitment and selection of pilots timely and efficient and why? What worked for whom is what circumstances?	To what extent and how is the programme expected to influence joint working between the partners in the future?	Can the learning around the governance, funding and science elements of the programme be scaled up and rolled out more widely, to whom, and in what ways? a) Has the understanding and capacity of project partners improved and in what respects? b) How will the project partners ensure that the knowledge and capacity built during the project is retained and embedded within their organisations? c) How can learning be applied to future schemes?
Cross-cutting	What lessons have been learned, by whom and how, from delivering the pilots and the programme as a whole?	Were there positive or negative unintended consequences resulting from the programme? Who was affected, in what ways and why?	
Cross-cutting	To what extent, how and in what circumstances have these lessons influenced delivery of the programme?	Were there positive or negative unintended consequences resulting from the programme? Who was affected, in what ways and why?	

Annex 2: Further findings from the policy stakeholder research

In what ways did policy and evidence stakeholders want to hear about the NR programme and its findings?

Policy and evidence stakeholders shared that they are wanting to use the work of Nature Returns to guide related policies. They noted that the following formats would be most useful for this purpose:

- **Succinct updates**: Newsletter-type updates via email with clear titles (e.g., “Nature Returns Programme - Carbon Science Update”) are preferred for quick overviews.
- **In-Depth reports**: Detailed reports for thorough reading with succinct executive summaries.
- **Short summaries**: Fact sheets or summaries for a quick understanding.
- **Interactive presentations**: Webinars with materials provided beforehand, opportunities to submit questions, and Q&A sessions. Policy stakeholders highlighted that short presentations, with a really specific purpose and clear takeaway message, that last closer to 30 minutes are preferred.
- **Visualisations**: Graphs and infographics to make data more digestible.
- **Learning sessions**: “Lunch and learn” sessions for broader awareness, though not ideal for all teams.

Policy stakeholders emphasised that, where possible, communications should be targeted to specific teams in policy to ensure that the ‘so what’ is clear. Policy stakeholders shared that when they are engaged it should be clear what steps they should take based on the findings. This finding should be considered for planning the Nature Returns Conference.

Which findings are policy stakeholders interested in?

1. **Carbon sequestration data**: Across different habitat types, management styles, soil types, and geographies with uncertainty included. Interest in carbon flux for lesser-known habitats, especially scrub and hedgerow.
2. **Ecosystem services**: Findings related to quantifying and assessing ecosystem services and their benefits. This information may be used for valuing/creating payments for ecosystem services.
3. **Blended finance**: Policy stakeholders feel that they are familiar with the slow-moving state of nature and carbon markets, and these stakeholders reported wanting more information on which groups are leading the way and where

opportunities are for private, rather than public finance. This information is thought as beneficial for supporting future programmes and avoiding duplication of work. Stakeholders shared that there are Green Finance teams within government that will be optimal for receiving insights from the programme, though ideally this work will not be siloed.

4. **Methodologies:** Policy stakeholders reported wanting the methodologies/ approaches for partnership projects habitat creation/restoration and related scientific monitoring to be documented in detail to answer certain questions e.g., could it be replicable and was it cost effective? Policy stakeholders shared that they are also interested in the level of scientific rigor justifications for the approaches taken and uncertainty.
5. **Practical implementation**: Stakeholders wanted to learn about the practical considerations made by the programme and the potential consequences of findings. Stakeholders highlighted that there is a need for critical analysis of what works, what doesn't, and the reasons behind it.

What other insights were provided from meeting with policy stakeholders?

- **Opportunities for engaging policy stakeholders**: Many stakeholders interviewed see their role as knowledge sharers, amplifying messages to other teams who can implement changes. This audience may be leveraged for dissemination efforts.
- **Programme ownership**: As the Nature Returns programme does not fall under one policy team gaining visibility for the programme was more challenging. Having an engaged core policy team associated with the programme would have helped to increase awareness and ensure a clear path for communication around the programme.
- **Timing and relevance**: Dissemination efforts should consider the importance of timely messaging aligned with policy considerations. Timing may impact how findings are received and whether they are engaged with.
- **Previous work**: Acknowledging where work builds on previous projects can help policy teams to quickly understand the relevance and value of a programme and its findings.

Annex 3: Strength of evidence assessment

Table A3.1. Strength of evidence assessment criteria.

Strength of evidence criteria	Rating	Description
Extensiveness The depth of information available at this stage in support of the findings	*Extensive evidence*	3 or more sources of evidence
Extensiveness The depth of information available at this stage in support of the findings	*Sufficient evidence*	2 sources of evidence
Extensiveness The depth of information available at this stage in support of the findings	*Limited evidence*	1 source of evidence
Consistency The extent to which findings across sources of evidence are consistent	*Consistent*	The majority of findings are consistent across evidence sources
Consistency The extent to which findings across sources of evidence are consistent	*Mixed*	Some differences exist across different sources of evidence
Consistency The extent to which findings across sources of evidence are consistent	*Inconsistent*	Different findings emerge from different sources of evidence

Annex 4: Research methods

This section details the research methods used to gather evidence to answer the evaluation questions for this evaluation period.

The key research objectives of this evaluation were to:

1. Build on learning of what approaches have worked, what challenges were faced and whether the programme objectives have been met. What has been the benefit of the programme, what is the likely impact and how can this be communicated?
2. Explore how data, outputs and learning generated by the programme have been disseminated and used in the short-term. How are the outputs expected to change behaviour and policy?
3. Continue exploration of how different organisations work collectively and where this can bring benefits, particularly as working relationships and programme objectives change over the next phase.
4. Understand how mapping tools have been designed and used, and what is their relevance to the pilots? (Landscape Modelling Tool, LandApp, Land Use Choices Tool).

The two-phase approach

This evaluation took a two-phase approach. The objectives of the first phase were to:

- establish the audience for the intended dissemination, and
- fully understand the objectives for each workstream for this year including what needs to be put in place to secure the legacy of the programme.

This was then used to shape the research plans and refine the Theory of Change. Phase 2 objectives were to understand:

- how legacy elements of the programme have been put in place,
- how dissemination activities have been received,
- the scope and scale of partnership project and workstream achievements for this additional phase of the programme, and
- how estimations of the programme's economic impact might be approached.

Phase 1 activities:

1. Programme partner interviews
2. Policy stakeholder interviews

3. Rapid document analysis
4. Development of theories for best-practice dissemination and embedding of learning

Phase 2 activities:

1. Final programme partner interviews
2. Partnership project lead interviews
3. Policy stakeholder interviews
4. Attendance at programme events
5. Rapid document analysis
6. Building on the partnership project case studies produced for the 2024 Nature Returns programme final report

Key activities

Programme partner interviews
There were two rounds of eight interviews with workstream leads and key programme partners. These interviews aimed to explore:

- The aims of each workstream for the extended period of the programme and for the programme's legacy.
- How, and to what extent, programme objectives were being met.
- Any challenges or barriers to programme progress and how these had been overcome.
- Programme ways of working, the benefits of the collaborative approach being taken and ways in which learning would be taken forwards.
- Key outlets planned or being used for disseminating programme outputs and key audiences to be/being reached. Any reflections on what worked well and where there were challenges.
- Potential impacts of the programme regarding legacy.

The first round took place in August 2024 and captured the aims for the extended period of the programme. The second round took place in early February 2025 and captured progress prior to the end of the evaluation.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed that could be tailored for each of the workstreams as needed. Interviews lasted 45-60 minutes and built on the knowledge captured in previous evaluation interviews and workshops. Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams.

Interview transcripts were analysed to extract key data and identify common themes particularly around challenges, dissemination plans and collaborative working.

Policy stakeholder interviews
Two rounds of interviews took place with policy stakeholders. These interviews aimed to engage key policy stakeholders from Defra and DESNZ (as programme sponsors

and key government actors for Nature-based Solutions). The first round of interviews took place in September 2024 and focused on the following questions:

- What do you know about NbS and blended finance, what do you need to know, how do you want to learn it?
- What channels of dissemination work best for you and your team?
- What is considered best practice when disseminating knowledge and evidence on these subjects?
- Have they heard about the Nature Returns programme or seen any outputs?

The second round of interviews then looked at stakeholders' experiences of NR related dissemination and engagement. These interviews took place in February 2025. The interviews focused on the following questions:

- Did the dissemination and/or engagement reach these stakeholders? How effective was the dissemination?
- What has been learnt by policy stakeholders and how will that new knowledge be used?
- What are the potential impacts of sharing of findings from the Nature Returns programme?

This data built on the initial data gathering done as part of the first evaluation phase (2023-2024).
Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams and lasted 30 minutes. Two semi-structured interview guides were developed with flexibility to align with the interviewees knowledge of the NR programme. The second interview guide was informed by the programme partner interviews and document review regarding dissemination activities.

Rapid analysis of programme monitoring documents
Analysis of programme documentation supplied by the programme team occurred in two phases. The first phase involved reviewing documentation relating to the extended period of the programme as well as the end of year reporting from March 2024. These documents were analysed for both outcomes and impacts from 2023-2024 period and any plans and objectives for the 2024-2025 period.

The second phase looked to capture data on progress, ways of working, challenges and solutions and legacy planning. Documentation for analysis in both stages consisted of programme, steering group and workstream meeting minutes, workstream progress reports, partnership project progress reports, commissioned research, communications and dissemination materials. A sampling approach was used to select a sub-set of meeting minutes and progress reports for review.

Documents were analysed in excel. A coding framework was developed by the evaluation team to explore the outcomes emerging from the programme, how they were captured, what was driving these outcomes and what affects them. Analysis also

allowed themes to be generated from the documents using an inductive approach allowing for outcomes not previously considered to be captured.

Development of theories for best-practice dissemination and embedding of learning

To support dissemination and embedding learning within the NR programme and to support evaluation two theories for best practice were developed. A quick scoping review of literature was undertaken to gain an understanding of best practice within both dissemination of findings and embedding learning activities. This generated a set of principles for each topic. These principles were then used to design a realist theory for achieving successful dissemination and successful embedding of learning. A set of evaluation sub-questions were also generated to support and focus the evaluation activities.

Further detail on the methodology used to generate the principles and theories and the outputs themselves can be found in Annex 7: Research brief on best practice in dissemination of research findings and Annex 8: Research brief on embedding learning from the programme.

Partnership project lead interviews

There was one round of interview with partnership project leads which took place in January 2025 capturing progress in the extended programme period and building on the extensive research undertaken for the partnership project case studies which were complied in the previous Nature Returns evaluation (and can be found in Annex 6: Partnership project case studies).

These interviewed aimed to explore:

- Progress regarding habitat creation and restoration, green finance, communications and stakeholder/local engagement building on the case study research.
- Plans for future habitat maintenance, management and monitoring.
- Ways of working both with the core programme team and as a partnership team themselves.
- Any challenges faced and how these have been overcome. Identification of barriers and enablers for project progress.
- Exploration of key outcomes and impacts.

A semi-structured interview guide was created that could be tailored to each partnership project as needed. Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft teams and lasted for approximately 60 minutes.

Interview transcripts were analysed to extract key data and identify common themes particularly around challenges faced and solutions, ways of working with the core programme and dissemination of progress and impacts.

Attendance at programme events

The evaluation team attended three programme events: The Plymouth Partnership Project Forum event in June 2024, the Derbyshire Partnership Project Forum event in October 2024 and the Nature Returns programme conference in February 2025.

The evaluation collected feedback at events using an online survey format. Questions to gather feedback can be found in Annex 5: Surveys and interview guides.

Observation of the events and feedback was used to inform responses to the evaluation research questions and shape the design of the policy stakeholder interview guides. The Plymouth Partnership Project Forum event survey had 26 responses, the Derbyshire Partnership Project Forum event survey had 12 responses and the Nature Returns post-conference survey had 11 responses, from Defra, DESNZ, ALBs, academia and research, six of which are involved in the Nature Returns programme.

Building on the partnership project case studies

Partnership project case studies were developed for the Nature Returns evaluation report submitted in March 2024. A full methodology for the case study research can be found in the March 2024 report.

In this evaluation phase the case studies were updated to reflect the habitat interventions, community engagement and blended funding work taking place between March 2024 and March 2025. The case studies were updated using evidence gathered through the document review and from the partnership project lead interviews. The full case studies can be found in Annex 6: Partnership project case studies.

Reporting

All of the data collected across the different activities was analysed and triangulated in an excel spreadsheet. This was then used to answer each of the evaluation questions within this final report.

Annex 5: Surveys and interview guides

This annex section includes the surveys and interview guides used for data collection in phase 1 and phase 2 of this evaluation.

Phase 1 Interview guides and Surveys:

The phase 1 programme partner interview guide used in August 2024:

Interview Topic Guide: Programme Partners

Purpose of this study

ICF is evaluating the Nature Returns programme. Aims are to:

- Provide timely learning and guidance to help the project achieve its objectives.
- Ensure information needed to showcase the work of the project is being collected.
- Understand how all of the aspects of the Nature Returns programme are working together.
- Explore successes and where improvements could be made.

Results of the evaluation will be prepared for Spring 2025.

The focus and scope of the interview is to explore:

- Planned work and objectives for each workstream for this funded year.
- Any challenges and potential solutions foreseen in the work to come or currently being tackled.
- Evidence of how collaboration between project partners is fostered and what impact it has on programme objectives.
- Plans for dissemination of findings and creation of outputs.
- Activities and aims around the legacy of the programme, both as a whole programme and as the individual workstreams.

The interview will take approximately 45 minutes.

Consent: Would you be happy for us to record this interview? The recording is for notetaking purposes and will not be shared outside of the ICF project team. When we write up our report your personal data will remain anonymous. Data will be reported in aggregate in an anonymised fashion but due to the small number of interviewees we cannot guarantee that some findings may be traced back to an interviewee. We will endeavour to keep these instances to a minimum. We may use some illustrative quotes in our report, but these will not be attributed to you. Data will be stored securely by ICF and deleted within 12 months of the completion of the evaluation. Your participation is voluntary and if at any point you would like to withdraw information shared with us today, please let us know and we can remove the information from our reporting.

Introduction: As most of the interviewees have been interviewed a number of times before we can skip a formal introduction. Where an interviewee is new please start by clarifying their role and responsibilities.

Objectives

1. What are your workstream's main objectives for the remaining time in the programme?
2. To what extent do you think you will achieve these objectives by March 2025?
3. What do you think will be the main challenges to achieving the objectives?
4. How do you think these challenges can be overcome?
5. Can you give an overview of the main tasks to be done under your workstream in the remaining time of the programme?
6. What do you expect your main outputs to be this year?
7. Do you have any mapping tools associated with your workstream? If so, which ones and what is their aim/purpose? (*Prompts: Status of tools? Which data may go in?)*

Ways of working collaboratively

8. Is there any change in the ways of working for this year of work? *(prompts: more or less in-person meetings, change in frequency of meetings, different people working together due to different objectives)*
9. What is one thing you have learnt during the programme about working across organisations that you will apply to your working going forwards?
10. Are there any ways that collaboration across the programme or between individual workstreams can be improved?

Dissemination plans

11. What are your plans for sharing findings and outputs from your workstream?
12. Who do you consider to be your main audience?
13. What do you hope they will do with the findings/outputs?
    a. In the next 5 years?
    b. In the long-term (5 years +)
14. Are there any aspects of best practice dissemination that you would like to know more about?

Legacy

15. What would you like the legacy of the programme to be?
16. Are there any actions you are taking now or plan to be taking to secure this legacy?
17. What are the main challenges to achieving the legacy?
18. Are there any aspects of best practice around embedding learning into organisations that you would like to know more about?
19. Apart from the learning on working across organisations (asked earlier in section 1.2) is there anything else you have learnt from the programme that you will be taking forwards in other work?

Wrap up

20. Is there anything else about the programme or your workstream that you feel the evaluation should be aware of?

We will be summarising the results of these interviews and other evidence collection in a report in September.

The phase 1 policy stakeholder interview guide used in September 2024:

Topic Guide: Policy Stakeholders Baseline Interviews

Purpose of this interview

To explore key policy stakeholders' understanding of NbS and relevant topics and how they might engage with the knowledge and data generated by the programme.
To better understand the intended audience for dissemination and influence in terms of their knowledge gaps and preferred forms of communication.
This will help the programme team to formulate their engagement plans going forward and to understand how the data and outcomes of the programme can be best utilised by policy teams.
Consent: Would you also be happy for us to record this interview? The recording is for notetaking purposes and will not be shared outside of the ICF project team. When we write up our final report your personal data will remain anonymous. Data will be reported in aggregate across policy stakeholders. We may use some illustrative quotes in our report, but these will not be attributed to you. Data will be stored securely by ICF and deleted within 12 months of the completion of the evaluation.

Your participation is voluntary and if at any point prior to reporting you would like to withdraw information shared with us today, please let us know and we can remove the information from our reporting. We have an information sheet available with more detail on our data security processes and the purpose of this study if you wish to know more.

Introduction

1. Please can you briefly introduce your role and the aims of your team's work.

The Nature Returns Programme

2. Had you heard of the Nature Returns programme (formerly Nature-based Solutions for climate change at a landscape scale) prior to this interview? If so, how?
3. [*if yes*] What do you know of the Nature Returns programme?
4. Have you seen any outputs from the programme? *Blog post, reports, webinar, informal chat.*
5. *[if yes]* how useful was this output? Are there any ways this could be improved?
6. [*if yes, or having heard the description at the start of this interview*] How do you think it might it be useful/beneficial to you and your work, and why?

NbS and blended finance for nature baseline knowledge

7. What topics around NbS or BF would you like to know more about and why?
    a. How might you use this knowledge and what benefits could that create?
    b. What would be the best way to communicate this with you?

8. How do you currently share knowledge between teams?
    a. Are there different ways that you would like such knowledge to be communicated to you?
    b. What do you think are the most effective forms of communication in terms of gaining your interest and stimulating learning?

Wrap up

9. Is there anything else you would like to share today about sharing of knowledge around NbS and blended finance?

Thank you for your time today. We will be sharing our evaluation report with NE in Spring 2025.

Feedback survey from the Plymouth and Derbyshire partnership project forum events: Plymouth in June 2024:

Nature Returns Programme Workshop Feedback Form

Thank you for attending the Nature Returns Programme Workshop (12th June 2024). To improve workshops in the future and understand more about your priorities for the next phase of the Nature Returns programme, we would greatly appreciate any feedback that you can provide in this survey. We anticipate the survey to take roughly 5 minutes.

Workshop feedback

1. Was the workshop useful to you? (Yes/No)
    a. Please specify why.

2. Is there anything you would change about the format or content of the workshop? (Yes/No)
    a. Please specify what you would change.

Workshop outcomes

3. Are you happy with the outcomes of the workshop and actions agreed? (Yes/No)
    a. Why/why not?
4. Do you feel confident you can achieve the actions agreed at the workshop? (Yes/No)

    a. What support do you think you might need to achieve your aims, if any?
5. What do you think is the most important action you can take in the remaining time on the programme to ensure the programme's legacy after March 2025?
6. What will indicate to you that:
    a. The programme's overall aims have been achieved.
    b. The legacy discussed today has been achieved in the longer term.

Evaluation

7. What is the one question you hope the evaluation of the Nature Returns programme will answer?

Derbyshire in October 2024:

Nature Returns Partnership Project Forum: Feedback Form

Thank you for attending the Nature Returns Derbyshire Partnership Project Forum (2-3rd October 2024). To improve forums in the future and understand more about your priorities for the next phase of the Nature Returns programme, we would greatly appreciate any feedback that you can provide in this survey. We anticipate the survey to take roughly 5 minutes.

Forum feedback

8. Was the forum useful to you? (Yes/No)
    a. Please specify why.
9. Is there anything you would change about the format or content of the forum? (Yes/No)
    a. Please specify what you would change.

Feedback on presentations

WS2 science and evidence

10. What was one thing you learnt from the WS2 science and evidence presentation?
    a. How do you think the findings presented could be used/applied in the future?
    b. Any further reflections on the presentation?

Partnership case studies

11. What was one thing you learnt from the Partnership Case Study presentations?
    a. Did anything surprise you?

b. What “success” do you think could be replicated elsewhere?

Other case studies

12. What would you like to see happen as a result of sharing case studies?

Future vision

13. Following the future vision session how would you like the programme to support the partnership projects in the future? (aside from continued funding)

Phase 2 Interview guides and Surveys

The final programme partner interview guide used in February 2025:

Interview Topic Guide: Programme Partners

The focus and scope of the interview is to explore:

- Outputs and outcomes for carbon, biodiversity and ecosystem services.
- Progress on blended finance.
- Evidence of how collaboration between project partners is fostered and what impact it has on programme objectives.
- Plans for dissemination of findings and embedding learning.
- Activities and aims around the legacy of the programme, both as a whole programme and as the individual workstreams.

The interview will take approximately 45 minutes.

Introduction

1. To what extent have you been able to work towards/complete your workstream objectives for this year?
    a. WS1: Preparing learnings, managing habitat delivery, maximising programme spend
    b. WS2: Completing field work and data analysis, prepare data for future use, and develop papers and dissemination materials
    c. WS3: Finishing data collection and analysis, using external data to draw conclusions on carbon sequestration in different contexts, develop papers and dissemination materials
    d. WS4: Trialling land-use choices tool, creating strategic funding plans, completing gap analysis research to identify methods to support the blended finance work
    e. Forestry Commission: Executing oak band monitoring, setting up catchment laboratories, testing emerging carbon codes e.g. Wilder Carbon, Agroforestry Code

WS2 and WS3 only: Carbon, Biodiversity and other ecosystem services

2. What do you think are the short-term impacts of the carbon science?
    a. Have you identified any benefits and for whom?

3. To what extent are the new developed tools/methods scalable? E.g. Lidar, carbon flux sampling, chrono sequence sampling of sites (difference in age of sites)
    a. How can these applicable to other/connected work?
4. To what extent is the data in a format that is accessible and useable?
    a. Will the data be open source? For whom/ through which platforms?
    b. What will be the key uses for the data?
5. To what extent has data from programme partners and partnership projects been integrated into modelling tools (e.g. WS3 Land Use Modelling Tool)?

WS4 only: Blended finance

6. To what extent have you been able to support the partnership projects with developing strategic funding plans?
    a. What worked well and/or less well during the formation of the strategic funding plans? For which partnership projects? Why?
    b. What are the challenges for developing the strategic funding plans?
7. How has the Land-use choices tool supported the strategic funding plans to date?
    a. Have there been any successes/challenges with this tool?
8. What could be the benefits of the needs assessment / gap analysis?
    a. How can the resulting work provide resources/support for Green Finance work?
9. What are the anticipated benefits of the online action learning set?
    a. What outcomes from these are you hoping for?
10. Are there any other activities you are working on as part of the programme?
    a. Have there been any indications of early impacts of this work?

FC only: Catchment laboratories, carbon codes, and oak band monitoring

11. Have the catchment laboratories been set up?
    a. Have there been any outputs or outcomes from the catchment laboratories to date? If so, what are they?
12. What are the results of testing the carbon methodologies from NEIRF? E.g., Wilder Carbon Code and Agroforestry Code?
    a. How do you anticipate you will work with these codes moving forward?
13. What is the progress of the oak band monitoring project?
    a. How will this contribute to the evidence for carbon science that partnership projects have?

Stakeholder engagement

14. In what ways have you engaged with stakeholders such as policy makers, researchers and investors?
    a. What approaches worked/ didn't work? For whom and why?
15. *[Where relevant to workstream WS1, WS2 and WS4]* From working with the partnership projects, what have you learnt about ways to engage local communities?
    b. What do you think the key benefits of the community engagement have been?

c. At the programme level, what could be the potential benefits of understanding local engagement?

Ways of working collaboratively

16. How do programme partners plan to continue to collaborate after the conclusion of the programme?

17. Do you have any final thoughts on the ways of working collaboratively across the programme?

Dissemination and embedding learning plans

18. To what extent has a dissemination plan been developed?
    a. Does the plan include short-term and long-term dissemination?
    b. What was the process for making the plan?
    c. Do you feel that the plan adequately covers the work of the workstreams /wider programme? Why/Why not?

19. To what extent have audiences been identified?
    a. How were they identified? Are there audiences identified for each of the workstreams?
    b. In what ways have key people within key departments (or outside) been identified who can amplify messages?

20. How much dissemination have you done to date?
    b. How well do you think this has gone?

21. To what extent have you created a learning strategy for embedding the learning from the programme beyond the funded period?
    a. How have key learnings been identified?
    b. Have any resources been allocated towards carrying this out within this phase of the programme?

Legacy and lessons learned

22. What do you think will be the main/lasting outcomes of the programme at its conclusion?

    (P*rompts: outcomes and impacts across carbon science, private finance, engagement with communities, future NbS interventions, future working of government departments and research organisations*)

23. Are there any key lessons you have learned from this project (post-March 2024) that you will take forward to future projects?

Wrap up

24. Is there anything else about the programme or your workstream that you feel the evaluation should be aware of?

We will be summarising the results of these interviews and other evidence collection in a report in March 2025.

The partnership project final interview guide used in January 2025:

Interview Guide: Partnership Project Leads

Focus and scope of interview:

- An update on activity and progress during the programme extension.
- Explore stakeholder engagement efforts and any blended funding work.
- Understand any challenges faced, how these have been overcome and what lessons have been learnt from delivering the project post-March 2024.
- Plans for future habitat maintenance, management and monitoring.

This interview will help us to update the case study of this partnership project to showcase what has been done in different areas of the UK, with different habitats and involvement of different organisations/ partnerships.

Progress

1. What project activities have taken place since March 2024 under the Nature Returns funding?
2. What activities are planned before March 2025?
3. Is the project running to your original timescales? Why not?
4. Have any activities changed or been adapted? Why? To what extent?
    a. Do you think that any of these changes will affect the outcomes of the project? Why/Why not?

Impacts

5. What impacts from your work under the Nature Returns programme have you identified to date, if any?
    a. Were any of these unexpected?
6. How have you captured these impacts? E.g through which monitoring or reporting activities?
7. What impacts do you think there will be once the work is complete? Short term (1-5 years) and longer term (5 years+)?
    a. What benefits do you think there will be for nature/people/community?

Working with land managers *(GWT, FHT and GW only) Note we are using 'land managers' to cover landowners, managers of land and tenant farmers.*

8. Has there been any change in which land managers you are working with during the programme extension period? If so, why?
9. *[If new land managers involved]* How did you encourage participation?

Stakeholder and community engagement

10. How has the project been engaging with the local community? What activities have you carried out?
11. Has your approach to engagement or groups engaged changed?
12. What challenges have you faced with engaging the community?
13. Have you had any more involvement with the Nature Returns communications campaign?
    a. What has this involved?
    b. How are you using or planning to use the Nature Returns communication outputs?
    c. What impacts, if any, do you think there will be for your organisation/ this project of being part of a large communications campaign like Nature Returns?

Blended funding *(GWT, DWT, GW only)*

14. What activities have you been doing with EA (WS4) on blended funding?
15. How have you found this experience?
16. What would you like to happen next regarding blended funding efforts for your project?

Working with the programme team

17. How have you found your engagement with Natural England, Defra and other partners in this additional phase of the programme?
18. How have you found information sharing between partnership projects and is there anything you would like to see done to improve this?
19. How did you find participating in the partnership project forums? Was there anything else you would have liked to get out of these events?
20. Do you think anything could be improved about how the main programme team works with the partnership projects?

Challenges and lessons learned

21. What challenges or difficulties have come up in this additional phase?
22. How have you tried to overcome these challenges?
    a. Are there examples of approaches that have worked and some that have not worked?
23. Are there any other key lessons you have learned from this project that you will take forward to future projects?

Future monitoring*

24. What are your plans for future habitat maintenance, management and monitoring?
25. Is there anything else the programme could do to support with future monitoring?

Wrap up

26. Is there anything else about your partnership project or the wider NR programme that you would like to talk about today?

We will be summarising the results of these interviews and other evidence collection in a report in March 2025.

The final policy stakeholder interview guide used in February 2025:

Topic Guide: Policy Stakeholders Interviews

Purpose of this interview

To understand how the programme has been engaging with key policy stakeholders to date. Including what outputs stakeholders are aware of and any feedback on these outputs.
To explore key policy stakeholders' understanding of NbS and relevant topics and how they might engage with the knowledge and data generated by the programme.
This will help the programme team to understand how the data and outcomes of the programme can be best utilised by policy teams and how current outputs are being perceived.

Introduction

1. Please can you briefly introduce your role and the aims of your team's work. *[for those we haven't interviewed before]*

The Nature Returns Programme

2. Had you heard of the Nature Returns programme (formerly Nature-based Solutions for climate change at a landscape scale) prior to this interview? If so, how? *[for those we haven't interviewed before]*

3. [*if yes to Q2*] What do you know of the Nature Returns programme?

4. [*start here for those we have interviewed previously]* What have you seen or heard from the Nature Returns programme since our last interview?

5. Did you attend the Nature Returns Programme Conference at Kew Gardens on the 6th February or the Derbyshire Defra team visit? *[Defra team visit only relevant to Defra interviewees]*

    a. How useful did you find the conference and/or the Derbyshire visit?
    b. What were the key learnings you have taken from this?
    c. How do you think this learning will be useful to your work and team?
    d. Do you have any other feedback or improvements for the conference and/or Derbyshire visit?

6. Have you seen any outputs from the programme? *Prompts: Blog post, reports, webinar, informal chat.*

7. *[if yes to Q5]* how useful was this/were these output/s? Are there any ways this/these could be improved?

8. [*if yes to Q5, or having heard the description at the start of this interview*] How do you think the Nature Returns programme might be useful/beneficial to you and your work, and why?

9. What would you like to see come out of the programme? *Prompts: data sets, reports, presentations etc.*

Wrap up

10. Is there anything else you would like to share today about sharing of knowledge around NbS and blended finance?

Thank you for your time today. We will be sharing our evaluation report with NE in Spring 2025.

The feedback survey used for the Nature Returns Conference in February 2025:

Nature Returns Conference Survey

Introduction

Thank you for attending the Nature Returns Conference (6th February 2025). To improve future communication of the programme's findings and to learn about how the conference has impacted your understanding of Nature-based Solutions, we would greatly appreciate any feedback that you can provide in this survey. We anticipate the survey to take roughly 5 to 10 minutes.

ICF has been commissioned to conduct an independent evaluation of the programme and provide learning support, reporting in Spring 2025.

Conference feedback

14. Was the conference useful to you? (Options: Yes/No)
    a. Box: Please specify why.

15. Is there anything you would change about the format or content of the conference? (Yes/No)
    a. Box: If yes, please specify what you would change.

16. Did you learn anything new from the conference? (Options: Yes/No)
    a. Box: If yes, what did you learn?

Programme communication

17. Were you aware of the Nature Returns programme prior to the conference? (Options: Yes/No)
    a. Box: If yes, how have you previously engaged with or learned about the programme?
    b. Is there anything that you think can be improved about the programme's engagement with you? (Options: Yes/No)
        i. Box: If yes, please specify.

18. Is there anything you would still like to know about the Nature Returns programme or Nature-based Solutions in general? (Options: Yes/No)
    a. Box: If yes, what would you like to learn more about?
    b. Box: If yes, how would you like future learning from the programme to be shared with you? (Options: email, newsletter, site visits, conferences, face-to-face meetings, webinars or learning sessions, other – please specify)

Wrap up

19. Is there anything else about the Nature Returns conference or programme you would like to mention? (Options: Yes/No)
    a. If yes, please specify.

Many thanks for completing the survey. Your feedback is much appreciated.

Annex 6: Partnership project case studies

This set of partnership project case studies was originally compiled in March 2024 for the first Nature Returns Evaluation period. The case studies were then updated in this evaluation phase using evidence from the document review process and the final interviews with partnership project leads. A full updated case study for each of the six commissioned partnership projects can be found in this annex section.

Partnership Project Case Study: Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration Project

Lead organisation: National Trust
This case study is based on interviews with five project team members, one workshop with National Trust volunteers and reports submitted by the project team to NE.

Overview

The vision of the Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration Project, led solely by the National Trust, is to create a more dynamic mosaic landscape, mixing trees, scrub and water across 670 ha of National Trust-owned land (split into 22 parcels). 350ha of marginal agricultural land will be managed as a low input, extensive grazing system. The creation of a mosaic of woodland and other habitats (80.4 ha of new wood pasture, 4.6ha of broadleaf woodland, 8.7ha of species rich grassland, and 45.55 ha of heathland) will buffer, connect, and extend current Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) woodlands and heathlands. Key aims for the project include building resilience in the Southwest woodlands landscape, opening up new areas of public access, and extensive project monitoring. The main activities involve fencing and rearranging boundaries to allow for more expansive grazing and the break-up of traditional field systems; planting large areas of woodland and creating corridors; utilising a mix of carefully controlled grazing, rootling, and wallowing animals, to encourage natural regeneration and scrub to form; and breaking up the monocultures of woodland and heath, using processes such as grazing, cutting, patch felling and pollard creation.
The partnership project received £1,166,130 of funding through the Nature Returns programme.

Factors of success

- Having full control of the land has allowed the project team freedom to make choices aligned with their beliefs and priorities and those of the National Trust.
- The core team was already in place and the vision for the landscape had already been developed, including plans to try new things and experiment. The National Trust being a large organisation means there is huge capacity for support, which would not be the case if land was owned by private landowners.
- The National Trust as an organisation have a culture of taking time to engage with people through informal conversation, involving volunteers and learning events.
- Public access is a key part of the National Trusts' work and helps increase public support.

Progress, outcomes and expected impacts

Habitat creation and restoration

The project is currently on track to meet its habitat objectives. Original objectives were modified due to disagreement between the National Trust and Natural England (NE) around approaches to heathland creation and management, specifically in relation to

waxcap grassland fungi. As a result, 45 ha of heathland restoration was postponed to become part of the planned works for the 2024/2025 funded period. Having full and sole control of the land was said to have allowed the National Trust the freedom to make choices based wholly on its own aims and aspirations.

Table A6.1. Habitat creation and restoration.

Habitat type	Target hectares	Hectares completed as of latest report (December 2024) (Ha)
Wood pasture	80.4	80.7
Species-rich grassland	8.7	8.7
Broadleaved woodland	4.6	4.6
Heathland	45.55	45.55
Total	139.25	139.55

Monitoring is a large component of the project and has been adequately resourced. The project delivery team have allocated significant effort to capturing baseline conditions, covering all major species groups, soils and capture imagery. The plan is to monitor some of these elements over the next 10 years and explore changes over time.

Although future monitoring work is not budgeted for, partly due to the upfront nature of the funding, they have invested in the equipment needed, developed this area of expertise through training days with professional surveyors and involved many staff, volunteers and experts to be able to continue monitoring into the future. They planned to hold more training days and to involve the public and volunteers to help increase their interest in undertaking future surveys.

The extent of the survey work led the project team to work with eight to ten different groups involved in different areas of survey work. Whilst this takes considerable time to coordinate, the benefit in opportunities to upskill and engage with communities and in being able to undertake more monitoring was found to outweigh the costs.

Project reporting indicates the wildlife surveys and monitoring are now complete and included vegetation, reptiles, dormouse, breeding birds, invertebrates, bats and other small mammals. Winter bird surveys are underway. They are also considering incorporating results from this year's monitoring work into the Baseline Biodiversity Assessment, updating the existing report and creating a species record dataset.

After continued discussion with NE, they arrived at a compromise work close to their original intentions on the disagreement surrounding the heathland restoration (described in the Challenges section). This entailed a habitat mosaic, leaving some areas undisturbed for the benefit of waxcaps and disrupting other areas to trial restoration techniques, including cutting and spreading brush, heavy mowing, light cultivation, and small-scale trials of cutting and translocating heather turf. The team expressed their satisfaction with the second years' progress and noted their improved confidence in comparison to the previous year.

Impacts

In terms of short-term impacts, the landscape is already visually changing to some extent e.g., establishing a taller average grass height in grassland and the associated species moving in due to the cover provided. They have also seen increased numbers of birds of prey, barn owls and green woodpeckers thanks to the changes in land management.

Over the longer term, the area should have better public access (and more opportunities for the public to engage with the landscape) and animals should be able to roam over larger areas. Pigs will structurally change the ground, creating pockets that capture surface water and slowing water flow. They will also create opportunities for tree regeneration and diversify the sward species on species-poor grassland.

Within the next five to ten years, they expect to see an increase in invertebrate, small mammal and amphibian populations, and the natural regeneration of wildflowers and tree species.

The initial interventions of the project will give way to natural management of the landscape (whereby natural processes are heavily relied upon to maintain the landscape as opposed to human intervention). The hope is also that, since the National Trust are early adopters of what is an unconventional approach to landscape restoration, others will learn from what they have done and adopt it in other areas of marginal coastal upland. Additionally, the trialling of different restoration techniques on the heathland may impart learnings on restoration best practice and will likely be relevant to land-use planning going forward.

Challenges

The main challenge related to habitat creation and restoration activities discussed with the project team, was around the proposed heathland works. The team was surprised, given that the bid was accepted, that there were questions around the approach to heathland creation from NE based on a *"*dogmatic*"* perspective of how plans should be aligned with waxcap mushroom conservation (partnership project interview). The result was the postponement of heathland creation as discussed above and as evidenced in project reporting. However, specialists from NE conducted soil sampling to enable the team to collect data related to the waxcaps alongside other habitat creation and interventions opportunities. eDNA analysis of the soil sampling identified the site as being nationally important for waxcaps. Further consultation, and a site visit with NE Specialists in June 2024 identified a way forwards, with interventions targeted to those areas where surveys indicated waxcap presence was least likely.

The project team felt there should be more flexibility to pursue approaches they deemed to be beneficial and multi-purpose. In addition, the lengthy EIA scoping process with the Forestry Commission ahead of woodland works was a barrier, as was the seasonality of works and of the ecology of the landscape, needing to account for bird nesting times, for example. There were also some difficulties in acquiring certain materials such as sweet chestnut fencing.

The team raised that since their vision did not wholly conform with the ways in which protected sites are managed, they faced some difficulty in trying to change perceptions. Their vision is not just to create a mosaic of habitats within a landscape but mosaics even within habitats, for example, trees dotted about in grasslands. Increasing the complexity and diversity in the landscape is seen as important, more

important than “following standard guidance and procedures” (partnership project interview). One project team member said,
"A patchwork of monoculture habitats will still have fragmentation and sustainability issues. Some protected landscapes are failing because they're actually a monoculture” (partnership project interview).

The project team also discussed the importance of maximising an area’s potential rather than returning it to what it once was. Given the National Trust is the sole partner, the challenge of changing perceptions did not necessarily have a large impact on what they could and are achieving, but it was mentioned that there was space for NE to reconsider the structures and processes in place for their protected sites to be more responsive to environmental needs.

Blended finance

Blended finance is being pursued through the National Trust as an organisation as opposed to through the partnership project directly. Project reports indicate that Woodland Carbon Code (WCC) registration of larger blocks of tree planting for the partnership project have been submitted to central National Trust ahead of planting occurring.

Effective dissemination

The project team expressed that little had been done within the first year to share the project’s work wider than the organisation and key stakeholders. However, they increased their communication efforts in the 2024/2025 programme year following a monitoring report, which brought the various surveys and their findings together, and acted as a key resource in communicating what the project was doing more widely. Volunteers saw the links between this project and other conservation-minded organisations as a real force for change.

In summer 2024, BBC Countryfile filmed members of the team to present the landscape-scale nature recovery projects happening across West Exmoor, including the work at the Kipscombe site. This was aired on the 8th September 2024. Currently, the team are working on a small documentary to increase public engagement and awareness of the project.

Additionally, the team are creating a virtual tour of the project, enabling people to explore the site and learn about different interventions through nodules and stories embedded within the imagery. They are also exploring the possibility of getting some information onto a bus that runs past the species-rich grassland.

The team noted that signage in the right places can be one of the most effective methods of educating and engaging the public, whilst also being the most sustainable and affordable.

The team reported limited involvement in the Nature Returns communications campaign, despite seeing this as an opportunity to raise the profile of their work. One interviewee stated:
“it's a bit of a shame because what's a real surprise is I have talked about the Nature Returns programme in different meetings I've been in with Natural England and there's people in Natural England [who] don't know what it is” (partnership project interview).

Stakeholder engagement

Community

A variety of events have been hosted in conjunction with the project:

- Public tree planting days and tree planting with various groups including schools
- School walks and talks with a nearby school
- A presentation at a parish council meeting
- A visit from a local agricultural college
- Talks with experts on various topics such as butterflies
- Informal conversations with passersby (said by the volunteer group to be important in garnering local support and something at which the project team did particularly well)
- Sharing updates on local community Facebook groups and Parish magazines
- Weekly volunteer session including volunteering swaps between Exmoor and Dartmoor
- A one week “Wild Camp” for trainees from Plymouth Natural Grid, involving various volunteering activities. Several months later the Plymouth Natural Grid team returned to help with some conservation work.
- Two further Wild Camps also occurred.
- A whole week of free public nature events.
- Attendance at two careers fairs for people aged 11-18, promoting careers in conservation

Due to the geographically remote nature of the site, the team discussed the lack of opportunities to engage with people. Their nearest neighbour is a farmer with little interest in the project’s activities. Hence, they assigned funds to community engagement over the second half of Nature Returns. They now have a stipulation in all agreements with contractors that they must always engage National Trust volunteers, allowing them to join in if they wish.

There are also plans to increase tourism opportunities in the wider landscape on National Trust land, creating immersive, nature-based and affordable experiences. Furthermore, conversion of a couple of the farm buildings is currently underway (at the time of writing in February 2025), which aims create space for more educational and engagement events in future.

Community response

Community reception of the project has been largely positive. The project team noted several factors possibly influencing this positive response. Firstly, a tenancy on the land ended and it came back under the National Trust’s estate. This occurred 5 or 6 years ago and so the connection between land being taken out of production and used in the partnership project was not necessarily made by community members. The project team highlighted this as many in the local community feel protective towards farmland and do not always share the National Trusts vision for farming alongside nature. Secondly, positive sentiment was also generated as the land is marginal and increasing public access is a part of the project.

Negative feedback was generally related to wider change rather than the project specifically, although negative comments occurred on social media around the project ruining the landscape and displacing farmers from their fields. These were most often

based on false information and came from farmers and landowners. It is National Trust policy not to respond to comments online, however this does not give the team the opportunity to directly address misinformed posts. The team did feel, as result, that communications and engagement to address negative and misinformed comments being spread was very important and that taking time to speak to people would likely have a ripple effect in garnering support and understanding. Volunteers felt that informing the public on what nature restoration looks like, in particular where it looks untidy, was also important.

Impacts on volunteers

Volunteers felt welcomed by staff and part of the team. One volunteer said:
“You don't feel you’re just turning up today volunteering and they’re like ‘thanks for your labour’. You truly feel part of a team that includes the staff” (partnership project volunteer).

They have been part of the project from beginning to end, which differed from being deployed to different areas for different activities each time. This increased their motivation and sense of achievement.

The biggest benefit, as discussed by local volunteers, was the increase in their knowledge (e.g., botany) and skills (e.g., building stone walls), and the encouragement to use them. For project staff, skill levels and employability were said to have increased, particularly for assistant rangers, and a position to undertake bird surveys was created. There has also been sharing of knowledge between National Trust properties, such as Dartmoor and Lizard Point, and a couple of bigger landowners were said to have taken aspects of the project on board (*this would need further exploration*).
For the future, benefits are expected to be generated through tourism and encouraging more of the community to use facilities in the landscape, e.g., for group meetings, although it was acknowledged that the landscape is always going to have limited visitors due to its location. The communications and engagement officer’s role was seen as ensuring the benefits are well-known, making local community involvement in the project key.

Engagement beyond the volunteers

Volunteers felt that events organised, although helpful in establishing connections between the Trust and landowners, were largely preaching to the converted and that more needed to be done to engage with people with little knowledge of Nature-based Solutions (NbS) as well as conventional farmers. This view was shared by the project team, who would like to find ways to engage with people who don't necessarily want to know.

Things like having more information signs with QR codes to sites telling the story of parts of the project, greater social media presence, easier to find links to local projects on the National Trust’s website and getting media coverage of the project were seen as ways of helping to win public opinion. In addition, the project was seen as an opportunity to engage with economically deprived families or those out of work.

Programme collaboration

On the whole, the programme was said to be a positive experience and all the programme partners were found to be very supportive. The site visit was seen to be

important for building the connection with partners and increasing their understanding of the project. Partners were said to understand the scale of the projects and the activities being undertaken. The bid submission process was said to be open and transparent and the ability to develop a bespoke project, flexible to the needs of the particular landscape was appreciated by the project team. The challenges discussed in relation to programme collaboration and delivery were around some of the processes.

The project team felt that a good mix of partnership projects were chosen in the programme, each with different strengths, which increased opportunities for learning. To build collaboration and share learning, the project team thought it would be useful to draw on the experience of some of the other partnership projects. The project team suggested that centring partnership project meetings around specific topics, questions or problems that need to be solved as a team could lead to positive outcomes and help the teams deliver when under pressure. It was acknowledged, however, that this was difficult during intense delivery periods.

They suggested creating an online forum where not only project partners could exchange knowledge, but one which also was accessible for members of the public. Nevertheless, they found the partnership project forums very useful for learning about the context of other projects and the activities taking place. Already they have engaged with Plymouth's Natural Grid and Derwent Living Forest Project through reciprocal site visits.

One example where the project team felt they might require support, was around developing simple but quick and effective ways of measuring community/people engagement outcomes.

There was said to be a lack of clear guidance on fund changes and claiming processes, which took a lot of time to go back and forth with multiple people at NE. The reporting mechanism and template were initially found to ill-suit the project and its activities, differing to the way a National Trust project is managed. Reconciling these two ways of working was found to be a challenge and time consuming for project administration. As an example, being asked to provide a percentage of how advanced the project is was difficult given their work on multiple habitats and multiple activities, each with their own timelines. As such, these estimates were largely guesswork. The percentage of the budget for different activities was also difficult to calculate given that materials, for example, may be bought in bulk for use across multiple activities and sites.

Despite the reporting percentages being approximate, they had not received any feedback on reports or questions from programme partners. There was an understanding amongst the project team that these challenges likely result from government organisations doing things differently to other organisations. Nevertheless, programme partners had responded when feedback was requested around combining spending under a monitoring budget as opposed to under multiple sub-headings.

During the second half of the programme, the team found that the reporting burden was much more manageable. They noted that as their relationship improved with NE, reporting not only became more efficient, but the way in which the project was managed was much more relaxed and adaptive to the individual projects' needs.

The last area the project team felt was difficult was around the expectations on time commitments, which were perhaps not communicated clearly by the programme at the start. The commitment to programme activities was felt to be more than originally planned.

Lessons learned

Several areas of learning, particularly around how the project and programme could be improved in the future were discussed:

For programme partners and funders

- Better understanding of how the programme contributes to other policies and outcomes around, for example, water quality, better access to the countryside, nature recovery etc.
- Additional time for programme planning in order to plan collaboratively and discuss the individual partnership projects before they were being delivered.
- Increased flexibility in the funding to better accommodate seasonality and weather, which are impossible to avoid in projects such as these, would relieve pressure to deliver.
- It is important to take time at the beginning of the programme to collectively explore what information was needed from the partnership projects and how best to capture that in reporting and set clear expectations around this. A mutual conversation would be useful to translate guidance/expectations/requirements such as reporting into something more realistic and fitting for delivery organisations. Related to this the importance of face-to-face meetings was emphasised by the project team.

For the project team

- Volunteers noted a lack of diversity amongst those involved in the project and a need to ensure all opportunities to participate are as open and accessible as possible and that the project team continues to make active efforts to engage with a wider audience.
- This project highlighted the importance of creating structured habitats between fragmented areas, rather than single-species management.

Next steps

At the time of writing, project activities up until March 2025 include baseline monitoring of new areas and more intensive soil eDNA analysis in relation to waxcap decision-making. They also plan on repeating the soil eDNA analysis in five and ten years' time to monitor changes in soil biology and the effect of different interventions.

In general, grazing, habitat maintenance and monitoring will continue, as long as ongoing support for this is available.

Partnership Project Case Study: Derwent Forest Landscape Recovery Project

Lead organisation: Derbyshire Wildlife Trust
This case study is based on interviews with ten project team members, a community workshop with six community members and reports submitted by the project team to NE.

Overview

Derbyshire Wildlife Trust (DWT) planned to create and restore over 544ha of habitat across twelve sites in Derbyshire. This includes mature wooded habitats, grassland and wetland. This project contributes to their Derwent Living Forest Programme vision which aims to create 30,000 hectares of wooded habitats and wetland by 2050 connecting the Northern Forest and the National Forest. The Nature Returns partnership project leads directly on from DWT's Derwent Connections project, funded by the Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF), which set the groundwork for looking at woodland ecosystem connectivity and implementation of natural flood management measures (NFM). The project involves an advisory group, which includes interested stakeholders from across the Derwent River catchment. This project takes place on land owned by DWT and land owned by Derbyshire City Council, Derbyshire Dales District Council, Severn Trent Water and the Chatsworth Estate where third-party landowner agreements are in place for management of the land for 10 years. The project received a total of £891,220.75 in funding from the Nature Returns programme.

Factors of success

- Project team members have clearly defined and focused roles allowing them to be proactive and solutions focused.
- Preexisting mechanisms from the Derwent Connections project has streamlined monitoring from project inception.
- A strong long-term vision which motivates the team to create personal connections with those outside the organisation to increase knowledge and create impact outside of DWT itself. and
- Continuation and expansion of pre-existing engagement with the local community which is generating further interest from others in the local community who are keen to collaborate.
- A strong knowledge base on blended finance and dedicated resource towards this along with learning from experts at Triodos Bank.
- A focus on research with dedicated resource for species reintroduction and Nature-based Solutions (NbS) modelling and mapping which has led the way for NFM work currently in the pipeline.

In addition to the habitat restoration and rewilding of the twelve sites, the project also has a strong focus on green finance and community engagement. In both of these aspects they are building on previous work and aiming to understand how they can better mobilise local partnerships to increase understanding of NbS and support landowners with Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and other green finance opportunities. The green finance element also aims to improve DWT's knowledge of green finance opportunities and gain more understanding of investor's needs. DWT have partnered

with Triodos Bank to scope out the most appropriate funding mechanisms for different interventions and scales of projects.

Progress, outcomes and expected impacts

Habitat creation and restoration

Progress

The partnership project planned to deliver the following habitat creation and restoration:

Table A6.2. Habitat creation and restoration.

Habitat type	Target (Ha/m)	Amount completed as of End of Year Report (April 2025) (Ha/m)
Mature deciduous woodland	77.93	77.93
Orchard	0.5	0
Natural regeneration of deciduous woodland and scrub	11.71	11.71
Natural regeneration of dynamic mosaic of grassland and scrub	74.06	74.06
Natural regeneration of dynamic mosaic grassland, wetland and scrub	9.64	9.64
Natural regeneration of mature deciduous woodland	35.45	25.95
Natural regeneration of scrub	7.6	7.6
Natural regeneration of wood pasture	5.22	5.22
Open water	5.31	5.31
Species rich grassland	47.08	40.88
Wetland	4.82	4.82
Wetland mosaic	15.3	15.3
Additional wooded habitats	250	6.5
Total	544.62 ha	284.92 ha
Hedgerow	1333 m	650 m

Although much of the work is complete, some objectives will not be completed before the end of March 2025. Only 10 ha of the additional wooded habitat work is on track for completion by the end of March 2025, but pipeline schemes will account for around 100-150 ha. This delay is due to the difficulty of progressing through all the pre-planting requirements such as landowner engagement, development of woodland plans, grant applications and site preparation, alongside the constraints of seasonality,

all within a one-year project. The shortfall was partly related to a landowner deciding not to proceed with the planting due to a change in personal circumstances.

Furthermore, the wetland mosaic habitat creation is not expected to be completed until after project end due to a decision between DWT and Natural England for additional survey and feasibility assessment work to be undertaken, and there were shortfalls in the hedgerow and original species-rich grassland work.

The original application also included 0.5ha of orchard creation at Allestree Park however this habitat work has been removed from this contract due to public concerns around longer-term management (see section 1.2.4 on Stakeholder engagement for further detail).

Some of the delivery methods have also changed since the project application stage. This was most often due to further scoping and research taking place during the initial stages of the contract, which have revealed more effective methods for achieving the same outcomes. Examples include different grazing methods for use at Eldon Hill, implementing fixed point photography at Allestree Park as part of the monitoring strategy and ongoing discussions around the practicalities of introducing pigs at the Thornhill site.
The Eldon Hill site was visited during the evaluation fieldwork. This site was new to DWT management and is owned by the Chatsworth Estate. DWT are excited about this management opportunity as the site is an ex-quarry, which was previously heavily grazed. DWT see it as a 'blank canvas' for them to try new management and showcase to other land managers in the area how land can be managed more effectively for the environment and biodiversity. DWT's aim for the site was to support natural processes with a small amount of selective tree planting and light grazing from Shetland cattle owned by a neighbouring farmer. It is hoped that this site will be an example of how a more regenerative approach with lighter grazing can cultivate more species diversity, and they continue to monitor the site, hopeful that they will see positive changes over the coming years.

Additional to the original eight sites, four more sites managed by DWT received funding from the Nature Returns programme to assist in habitat creation/restoration, namely Wyver Lane, Chrich Chase Meadows, Gang Mine and Postern Mill. The latter is a project focused on re-meandering the river, while the others are focused on rewilding and grazing with cattle and/or ponies. Cattle have already been on-site at Gang Mine, the project has received approval to have four ponies on-site at Chrich Chase Meadow (a SSSI site) and at Wyver Lane the neighbouring landowner has approved cattle on-site ensuring they never enter the food-chain due to the nearby presence of Japanese Knotweed. The work on these three sites is more infrastructure-based rather than habitat-creation-based.

Expanding expertise
Five full time roles, two part time roles and five traineeships (four out of five are 12-month contracts) have been created or given further funding as a result of the partnership project. These include a project manager, a programme manager (0.5 FTE), a nature-based solutions officer, a beaver feasibility officer, a landscape water management adviser, a landscape recovery manager, a GIS officer (0.5 FTE) and a community engagement officer. Traineeships include a nature-based solutions trainee, a landscape design trainee, a nature recovery adviser trainee, a species re-introduction trainee (focussing on the Willow tit) and a 6-month green finance adviser

trainee. This job creation has been hugely beneficial to DWT as it increases focussed work on a range of topics.

Species specific research
Interviews in January 2025 indicate that the beaver feasibility project is in the process of pulling together a year-long stakeholder consultation across 20 key agencies. Additionally, the team have participated in a news piece on BBC East Midlands Today to discuss the beaver kits at the Willington Nature Reserve. The beaver feasibility study began as part of a previous project called Derwent Connections.
The DWT species re-introduction trainee has conducted a feasibility study for willow tits under the Nature Returns funding. This study has involved collating and analysing secondary research to understand the life history of the willow tit, the UK's second most endangered bird species. This research is conducted using private data sets and archives. It is hoped that this research will help DWT to set up habitat restoration suited to the willow tits.

NFM work
The partnership project had a strong focus on mapping and modelling work around NbS and NFM in particular. This work aims to understand the flood risk and potential for NFM interventions in the Derwent catchment. The mapping and modelling builds on previous work done for the Derwent Connections project and was supplemented by attendance at local flood meetings to understand local flooding issues and consider where solutions may be possible. After concluding that NFM could offer huge benefits, appraisals were undertaken on several sites and it has now become a central focus of DWT's long-term plan. NFM work is now scheduled on one site in February and promising dialogue with landowners suggest work on two further sites could be delivered before the end of March. However, work planned at Wyver Lane is delayed until further research is undertaken, as discussion with landowners revealed uncertainty regarding its ability to achieve the desired outcomes.

Monitoring
The evaluation monitoring survey results indicates that the project team conducted the following monitoring:

- Habitat diversity through drone and fixed-point photography, habitat surveys (BNG condition assessments and UK habitat surveys).
- The extent of engagement on the beaver reintroduction consultation through recording the number of attendees at events and the number of responses received.
- Volunteer engagement and wider community engagement through recording the number of volunteer sign-ups, number of groups engaged, attendance numbers at events, numbers of schools involved in the project, the number of tree nurseries set up and the number of pupils directly engaged.
- The number and type of NFM interventions implemented through desk-based assessments and site visits.
- Community feedback through surveys and emails.

The project team noted in their survey response that they already had systems in place for monitoring engagement from the previous project, Derwent Connections. This meant that engagement could be accurately monitored from the inception of the partnership project.

The project team also suggested that having a set of KPIs and monitoring requirements for all six of the partnership projects available early in the process would

have been beneficial for comparisons of data and to confirm to the project team that they had adequate monitoring processes in place.

Impact

It is too early in the project to see any measurable impact on the sites, particularly as much of the work has been infrastructure-based. However, there are visible impacts across many of the sites with thousands of trees and long stretches of hedgerow planted.

Social impacts are more evident at this stage. One interviewee spoke about their gratitude for the opportunity that their role presents. They emphasised the difficulties often faced when trying to enter the nature recovery sector. The interviewee suggested that the traineeship offered good opportunities for training and development of practical conservation skills. The interviewee planned to give a talk at their university about their current role and the opportunities it has given them to inspire the next generation of nature recovery experts.

DWT has grown their school network year-on-year, extending their reach and increasing visibility. This, alongside engagement with Parish Councils, community groups and landowners, has improved understanding of the feasibility and benefits of nature recovery, and with the help of the Nature Economy team, has incentivised farmers and landowners to get involved.

Project team interviews show that there is an increased understanding across the team on topics such as local NFM potential and flood risk, the willow tit life history and how different grazing management can affect different sites.
In the longer term it is hoped that the project work will:

- Help to promote rewilding and the natural capital offer as a successful mechanism to provide NbS, spur significant biodiversity uplift, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and sequester carbon, creating the most dynamic and resilient ecosystems possible to mitigate climate impacts.
- Contribute to the medium-term goal of delivering 10,000 ha of landscape restoration, and add to the pipeline of works to deliver a further 20,000 ha by 2050.
- Enable continual development of an economically viable programme, utilising blended finance, which will in due course support landowners to create and expand woodland and dynamic habitat mosaics.
- Lay the foundations for further nature recovery and research work, feeding into the beaver feasibility assessment and other related projects.
- Contribute data from the baseline surveys and other data collected by NE to be integrated into DWT's long-term strategy.

Challenges

The project team identified challenges arising from delays in completing the baseline surveys. Although the contract began in January 2023, baseline surveys were not fully complete until September 2023 as many surveys have to be conducted in specific seasons and can only be completed between May and September. This applied to both the NE baseline surveys and the DWT's own monitoring such as BNG condition assessments and Defra Metrics . As a result, much of the habitat work was delayed until after the baseline surveys were complete, this left about six months to complete the work. In addition to the seasonality, the large size of the Allestree Park site meant

that baseline surveys took three to four months to complete and involved three DWT teams and three ecologists.

Another challenge identified in interviews was delays caused by lengthy change control notice processes. Where the project team have required a change in allocation of funding, they have submitted a change control notice to Defra through NE. In one instance the change control notice took five months for Defra to sign off on the changes leaving the team with only two months of the contract period left to deliver those changes. During the five months the project team were not able to work on any of the aspects involved in the change causing delays.

Issues caused by third-party delays were a significant challenge, especially as it led to cancellation of some projects with landowners who were initially positive about habitat creation and had put resources into it. Additionally, exceptional delays in the Derbyshire County Council NFM permitting process have caused several works to remain outstanding, possibly through to March 2025.

The project team have found it challenging to work with mapping done by other individuals no longer working at DWT when there has been no handover period. This is because the mapping is often not in the expected format, and they are unable to ask questions. This may have meant more time was needed at the start of the project to get familiar with the mapping and adjust it to systems that fit the current team.

Furthermore, the level of resources required for effective community engagement was not anticipated. The recruitment of a trainee community engagement "Wild Communities" officer alleviated some of this strain, ensuring strong community engagement was maintained.

Interviewees from DWT noted a strong adaptive management approach in the programme, and when issues arose leading to certain objectives being no longer deemed as viable or feasible, funding could be reallocated and solutions sought to maximise the programme impact nevertheless.

Blended finance

The DWT are one of the most advanced project teams in their work and understanding around blended finance. Understanding the opportunities for more sustainable long-term funding is a high priority for the Wildlife Trusts and DWT have worked with Triodos Bank to improve understanding of the emerging markets.

Working with WS4

The project team described in interviews how they engaged with the WS4 Environment Agency (EA) team early in the process for knowledge sharing activities where they discussed work being done by EA, work around the Woodland Carbon Codes (WCC) and the example of the Aire catchment NFM project. These knowledge sharing meetings then developed into the sprint workshop sessions.

In the case of the DWT partnership project there was two sprint workshops. The first brought together organisations and groups from across Derbyshire who are working towards similar visions for habitat restoration and flood risk management with the aim of understanding how they can work together to increase impact and utilise market opportunities. The second was for DWT to discuss its ways of working to enable

further partnerships and the challenges involved in reaching the proposed 2050 vision.

In interviews, the project team were very enthused by the concept of the sprint workshop sessions as they saw them providing a unique opportunity to connect with local stakeholders who are active in the same sector but in a neutral environment facilitated by NE. It was felt that the NE facilitation would give credibility to the discussions and allow more open discussions with a less competitive feel as these organisations often compete for the same funding. The support from WS4 on the blended finance aspect was highlighted by the project team as a huge benefit of this project and the support given by NE was appreciated. The Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series on blended finance was also found to be beneficial, especially for those who had a greater preexisting technical understanding of the subject.

Upskilling to promote blended finance opportunities
The project team are also keen to share their knowledge on blended finance opportunities. In February 2024, the DWT team attended training run by the Forestry Commission. The training aimed to share communication tools to help demystify carbon sequestration payments for landowners. More accessible verbal and written communication for a non-specialist audience on the blended finance topic was identified as a need by the DWT team through their wider engagement with landowners. Previously in interviews, the project team described how this training would set up the next phase of the project where they were hoping to do a large-scale WCC application involving lots of different landowners who would not necessarily be eligible on their own or for whom it would not be financially viable. This training provided DWT with the tools and knowledge to help make the WCC application opportunity more accessible for landowners.

Working with the University of Derby
DWT have a Knowledge Transfer Partnership with the University of Derby to develop remote sensing and habitat tools and skills within DWT. The aim of this is to assess sites for BNG potential and model their habitat trajectory under rewilding. DWT are gaining the ability to assess the financial feasibility of further land purchases and land management approaches which provide outcomes for nature, whilst the University of Derby are achieving a more practical understanding of how to implement their theoretical ecological knowledge.

Working with Triodos Bank
Triodos Bank were originally commissioned to deliver three objectives as part of the partnership project. These objectives were:

- Delivery of a workshop on potential nature-based business models for the project team
- Development of a project assessment framework including review of site prioritisation and ecosystem benefits mapping work
- Development of a road map – a programme of work for the next phases of Derwent Forest Vision, a shortlist of priority projects and a stakeholder engagement plan

All three of these objectives were fulfilled by March 2024. In interviews, the project team stated that they really valued the expertise within Triodos Bank and were keen to partner with them again, so further work commenced to build on the new knowledge and resources. Currently, they are working together on a pilot business model for delivering NFM within the Derwent Catchment, which has been developed alongside a

buyer analysis and routes to market report. Having identified a suitable sub-catchment for the initial piloting, they are exploring financing mechanisms. Initially, NFM will just be a co-benefit as they are focussing on established markets such as BNG and WCC, but this will hopefully enable the financing of further monitoring and evidence collection to allow future scaling-up of the project.
The business model will likely be completed as a template, but further funding and refinement will be necessary to support external partners and landowners to provide data sufficiently accurate for investment readiness. Key outcomes of the business model development have been:

- The development of a NFM working group
- Internal capacity and knowledge growth built through the process of data collection for the financial modelling of interventions
- Baseline monitoring stations installed in the target sub-catchment
- Intervention mapping and high-level outcome modelling
- Identification of next steps and the support required from DWT for partners to achieve investment readiness

Dissemination of learning from the partnership project

Communication and engagement actions recorded by the team include:

- An initial project press release
- A rebrand of the webpage
- A 2-page NFM article in the Autumn edition of DWT's Wilder Derbyshire Magazine.
- A feature on BBC East Midlands Today on 8 November to talk about the new Beaver kits at Willington Nature Reserve and how NbS works.
- Development of 'Be a Jay Day' materials (webpage and videos) to promote planting of acorns by copying the actions of the UK bird species Jays.
- A Parish Council toolkit and NFM handbooks
- A landowner information sheet focusing on woodland creation and other management measures around carbon sequestration and water quality improvements
- Wooded habitat Guiding Principles documents have been compiled for White Peak and Peak Fringe
- Blog releases and social media posts focused on Derwent Living Forest, the Nature Returns Forum in Derbyshire and tree planting week
- Two newsletters on the Derwent Living Forest project

Additionally, the Derwent Living Forest webpage has been updated with Nature Returns information and there have been plans to install an interpretation board for the Postern Mill Weir site.

Nature Returns communications campaign
In terms of the Nature Returns communications campaign, the project team shared in interviews that they established contact with the NE communications team early on in the project and continued discussions at the Partnership Project Communications Forum in August 2023. In interviews, the project team felt that this communication was positive, however, at times the guidelines and level of permissions required for approval of outputs was a little restrictive.

In follow up communications post-interviews, the partnership project team reflected that the February 2024 Partnership Project Forum conversations around communications had inspired further discussion within the team on how they can

maximise the benefits of being part of a large programme. They feel that they can use communications to ensure the longevity and legacy of the project by promoting their natural processes approach.

In follow-up interviews in January 2025, the project team stated that the support and advice from the central communications campaign was regarded as useful, particularly the materials and content which they have been using for their own communications campaign. They were particularly appreciative of an occasion when the Nature Returns communications team visited the site to film some interview pieces for them, offering to share the videos and supplementary photos taken there.

Dissemination within the Wildlife Trusts
In an interview with a project team member, they shared that they planned on attending a Wildlife Trust 'cross working day' where they meet with other local wildlife trusts, in this case it was Cheshire Wildlife Trust, and discuss their work and how they can collaborate in the border areas. It was clear that the project team member would be discussing the partnership project work with the other Wildlife Trust and promote the learning achieved.

Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement has been a central pillar of DWT's Nature Returns work. In interview in January 2025, they claimed to have made contact with over 1000 people since the previous April, and seen increasing recognition through word of mouth leading to a snowball effect in engagement opportunities.

NE funding has contributed to numerous Parish Council, community and eNGO meetings, activities in schools, talks and volunteer events. These have led to new tree planting and habitat improvement opportunities, potential opportunities to include public land and private gardens in projects, additions to the volunteer network, and improved and newfound relationships with various stakeholders.

Aside from this they have also conducted two out of three planned workshops, engaging a variety of stakeholders on subjects such as NFM and wooded habitat creation.

Landowners

Although this partnership project does not involve direct collaboration with landowners through the habitat creation/restoration work, as DWT have full control of the selected sites, DWT are engaging with local landowners in other ways. In interviews, the project team emphasised the importance of informing landowners and land managers about NbS approaches and identified DWT's role in sharing knowledge around the practicalities, benefits and financial opportunities around NbS. This commitment is evidenced through the landowner-targeted publications and training courses.

Since March 2024, they have been working with private landowners on wooded habitat creation and NFM, liaising with them, helping with the grant process and offering to organise volunteer teams to assist with intervention installation.

In interviews, the project team identified the perceptions of other Wildlife Trust work as a barrier to engaging effectively with farmers. The example given was the Wildlife Trusts' stance and work around badger vaccinations and the TB epidemic. This is a

sensitive subject for many farming stakeholders and often this perception of the Wildlife Trust is passed down the generations in farming families. This can prevent farming stakeholders from trusting the Wildlife Trust teams and seeing the benefits that collaboration can bring. It was felt by the interviewee that these relationships are slowly improving as DWT makes efforts to engage in a farming-sensitive way and showcase how nature interventions can work alongside productive agriculture.

Landowners have also been in attendance in the workshops, enabling them to talk to both DWT and the partner agencies, opening up opportunities and building relationships. A total of twenty-four landowners attended the Wooded Habitat Creation Workshop.
Furthermore, two of the site management reports currently in progress are being co-produced by the neighbouring landowners, so that their land is also covered within these reports.

The community

The Derwent Forest Landscape Recovery Project is making significant efforts to engage with the local community.

A workshop was conducted as part of this evaluation with six members of the local community who are each engaged with the DWT Communications and Engagement Officer for four different projects[1]:

- ***Grindleford Parish Council Flood Group***: a group of parish councillors and local residents with a proactive interest in mitigating flood damage in Grindleford. DWT have engaged to assist with identifying relevant landowners, organising surveys of the riverbanks and floodplain, educating on NFM measures and assessments of measures that may be effective, connecting the group to the EA and Severn Trent Water, and supporting the group at engagement events.

  Impact: due to the surveys and baseline work completed the group are looking to build a levee on one of the riverbanks to encourage the water to run onto the floodplain rather than into the residential area. Support from DWT has helped the flood group feel part of Derbyshire's bigger picture and added validity and strength to the group's work. DWT have continued these efforts by attending a meeting with the Association of the Councils to spread the learning and create better join up where other councils are facing similar issues.

- ***Buxton Wild Weeks***: the participant is part of a climate group who deliver nature and climate related activities in primary schools in Buxton and an annual COP style conference for schools and colleges. DWT run NFM activities in the schools. One activity involves creating a flood map of the school grounds and then looking at ways to reduce the flooding risk or impacts. Another activity involves learning about leaky dams in rivers using drain piping. Some of these schools have also signed up to be tree nurseries for DWT. At the 2023 annual conference DWT gave careers advice and ran an acorn planting session. These planted acorns were then distributed to schools as part of the tree nursery project.

  Impact: 168 students across nine schools and one college attended the 2023 annual conference which was the third to be held. Over the previous few years DWT have engaged with approximately 1000 pupils from five

schools in Buxton across all years of primary education. A project team member said that the leaky dams session worked very well as DWT have created leaky dams in Buxton so the children are able to connect their learning with real life local interventions. The workshop participant highlighted how the knowledge on NbS is shared by the children to their parents and the teaching staff which in turn has impacted how they see their school and home environments. Some of the classes have planted willow, hedges or wildflower meadows on the school grounds based on their flood maps.

- ***Tree nursery project***: the participant is a Forest Schools Leader in Whatstandwell who is engaged with DWT as part of the tree nursery project. DWT run tree planting sessions for all primary school age pupils. The trees then grow at the school sites until they are ready to be planted out in Derbyshire and contribute to flood risk management.

  Impact: six schools signed up to be tree nurseries with 1500 seeds planted. The participant felt that this project was beneficial especially for the youngest children as they will see the trees that they planted grow and go to be planted in their local community. The participant shared that many of the children are very aware of climate change and flooding from the news. The tree planting and NbS education allows the children to see how they can be part of the solution. The tree planting sessions inspired curriculum activities for the forest school and other parts of the school for the rest of the term.

- ***Wilder Wirksworth's Wild Maple Trust project***: this participant was part of the Wilder Wirksworth group which was set up four years ago to encourage local residents to have wilder spaces. In April 2023 the group crowdfunded the purchase of an 11-acre sheep field with the idea to rewild it. DWT have been providing practical advice and support around tree and hedge planting as well as giving demonstrations at tree planting days.

  Impact: the group have valued DWTs support and advice, particularly with the tree planting day. This is a new connection from October 2023 so it is hoped that more engagement will happen in 2024 with a hedge planting day coming up. The group have found DWT to be very inspiring and enthusiastic.

The importance of this wide community engagement was emphasised by members of the project team who felt that this is key to helping DWT deliver improvements for nature on a scale larger than their own organisation. They also recognise the benefits to the local community in terms of motivating them around environmental issues and helping them to gain practical experience in delivering for nature.

Other engagement by DWT

The December 2023 quarterly report shows a sample of other engagement events such as presentations given at Parish council meetings, talks on NFM at local flood meetings, tree planting 'Be A Jay Days' attended by 47 people and tree planting with YMCA Derby.

One example of DWT reaction to stakeholder feedback is through the removal of the 0.5 ha orchard planting at Allestree Park from the plan. The proposed orchard had a mixed response from stakeholders with some keen on the idea and others opposed due to concerns around long term maintenance. Stakeholders identified a number of

other local orchards which have not been maintained and feel that this should not be allowed to happen again. Due to restraints around longer-term funding DWT decided to remove the orchard from the plan and focus the Nature Returns funding elsewhere. Other tree planting is taking place at Allestree Park through other funds.

Barriers to engagement
In interviews, the project team highlighted some barriers to engagement including time and capacity of the team. Interest in partnership working with DWT has increased as more people hear about their current work. An example being a significant response from parish councils after attendance at the Association of the Councils meeting. The team currently have one full-time officer working on engagement but may need more capacity to continue increasing their engagement.

Overall, it is clear that DWT have engaged with their community to give both practical support and educational opportunities. Feedback from the workshop suggested that DWT were very good at tailoring their approach based on age and level of environmental interest of participants. This helped the NbS message reach a wider audience.

Programme collaboration

In interviews, the project team were very positive about their working relationships with the Nature Returns programme team. They remarked that the inclusion of NE, the EA and the Forestry Commission on the partnership project advisory and steering groups has been beneficial for building relationships and sharing expertise, and they would like to have a NE representative on the Derwent Forest Advisory Board and steering group for projects going forward. The project team described working closely with the Forestry Commission to develop grant applications for woodland as well as receiving training from them. They have found the Forestry Commission to be an active part of their project board, providing updates on initiatives on a regular basis, and they feel that they have established a positive relationship through the Foresty Commissions' engagement in wood habitat creation workshops, presentations to the DWT and landowners and continued ad hoc knowledge exchange between both parties.

In terms of engagement with the NE partnership project Adviser, the project team felt that it was advantageous having a clear single point of contact. They highlighted that this was beneficial for building trust, in turn facilitating more effective sharing of issues and finding of solutions. The team felt supported in navigating the challenges of contract changes, the claims process and the changes to the reporting template.

The project team have found interacting with NE's WS2 survey team beneficial. A number of DWT staff and trainees have accompanied the survey team during the baseline surveys which has enabled them to learn more about the techniques and processes involved in collecting carbon data.

The project team have really appreciated the facilitation of cross-partner knowledge exchange, and they would like to see more opportunities for this. They also noted that continued sharing across projects after the conclusion of the programme is important, although they were unsure about the specific mechanisms which could be set up to enable this.

Lessons learned

The project team and community members highlighted a number of key lessons in their interviews:

For programme partners and funder

- Funding rounds need to match better with seasonal monitoring and work needs, particularly for shorter projects. The timing of the start of the contract meant that planning for habitat work could not begin until September as baseline assessments needed to be completed.
- Long approval processes for change control notices leads to delays and very short delivery periods. This is particularly an issue during short contracts with seasonal work. The time needed for approvals should be aligned better with the contract length.
- Funders should consider backing more community engagement work as part of environmental projects, as this is essential for long-term community support and allows for more integration of social outcomes into habitat work.
- Clear monitoring requirements for each partnership project should be defined early-on to ensure consistency in data quality and comparability between partnership project results.

For the partnership project team

- The continuity of nature funding is very important for creating meaningful long-term impact. This can particularly be seen through the stakeholder engagement activities where relationships need time to develop, and continued engagement can create the most effect. It can also be seen through the difficulties created by short-term job roles where team members are using work done by previous team members with no hand-over period. Although the importance of blended finance and more sustainable long-term finance solutions was already appreciated by DWT, the opportunity to work on this further with experts from Triodos Bank and NE has re-emphasised this importance and shown the value of partnerships.
- The potential impact created by DWT is increased greatly through their engagement with and support for local communities. Sharing of knowledge and expertise helps to inspire new projects and understanding of the environment from people of all ages and abilities.
- Engagement and building of meaningful relationships with landowners can takes longer than expected. It can also involve a significant amount of staff time. In addition, landowners can sometimes change their mind on project involvement due to factors outside of DWT control such as personal economic circumstances and uncertainty in the agricultural sector despite substantial investments of time and resource from DWT.
- The programme has highlighted the benefit of long-term strategy development, as it has the ability to elevate the impact of smaller projects through aligned and comprehensive objectives.
- Community engagement is resource intensive, so allocation of funding should reflect this.

Next steps

Prior to the end of the programme, DWT will continue to deliver the habitat creation and habitat restoration and NFM work. Additionally, a year-long consultation process involving twenty key agencies including NE is being pulled together to produce a feasibility strategy on the beaver work in March.

Longer term, the project team hope to look at further NFM creation and long-term management associated with beaver introduction in Derbyshire, potentially within next 5-10 years. Continued surveying of the site to build on the baseline data will also contribute to a long-term strategy for DWT.

Partnership Project Case Study: Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire Nature Freshwater Network

Lead organisation: Freshwater Habitats Trust
This case study is based on interviews with four partnership project team members and two landowners who are directly involved in the partnership project, a workshop with three members of the community and reports submitted by the project team to Natural England (NE).

Overview

46.6 ha of priority habitat is planned to be created or restored across eleven peatland fen and wetland/floodplain sites in the Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire area. The project was led by Freshwater Habitats Trust's (FWHT). The aim of the partnership project was to restore freshwater habitats for increased freshwater biodiversity and carbon sequestration at a landscape scale.

The partnership project also focused on an area that has been a priority for freshwater habitat research at the national level. Many of the project sites encompass some of Britain's longest running sites for freshwater habitat restoration and creation programmes with monitoring done by FWHT and their partners tracing back to the 1990's.

There are a variety of land managers featured on the project including the National Trust (NT), Hinksey Heights golf course, and the Buckinghamshire-Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT). NT and BBOWT also have tenanted land, and these tenants are also engaged with the partnership project. In the scope of this case study, 'land managers' is used to include both landowners and farming tenants involved in the project. In addition to land managers, the community engagement side of the project has created partnerships with local public libraries and local artists, among others.

The partnership project team consists of three conservation officers and one project manager. This team previously worked together on a Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF) project. The funding from Nature Returns has enabled Freshwater Habitats Trust to hire two of the conservation officers that had started their role at FWHT through the GRCF project.

The Nature Returns programme provided £992,657.33 to fund the habitat creation and restoration works. The biodiversity and carbon data collected through Nature Returns will support future development of BNG projects and contribute to the development of schemes included in the Wetland Carbon Code, which will tie into FWHT's Natural Environment Investment Readiness Fund project.

Factors of success

- Flexible and targeted project management with a clear division of work
- A previously established project team with past experience working together
- A positive and pre-existing relationship with the landowners
- Utilising available staff time to expand monitoring effort
- An established volunteer network with many individuals helping out with habitat restoration and creation works

Progress, outcomes and expected impacts

Habitat creation and restoration

Progress

At the time of writing (February 2025), all habitat creation and restoration works are expected to be completed for March 2025, except the floodplain wetland work, for which all possible wetland creation has been completed.

Table A6.3. Habitat creation and restoration.

Habitat type	Target hectares (Ha)	Amount completed as of End of Year Report (April 2025) (Ha)
Fens	10.95	10.95
Floodplain grassland	8.8	8.8
Floodplain Wetland	14.54	9.05
Floodplain wetland mosaic	1.61	1.51
Species –rich grassland	6.90	6.90
Pond	3.80	2.08
Total	46.6	39.29

Work completed so far includes:

- Peatland restoration at Hinksey Heights Golf Club and the Coleshill Estate
- Cutting back scrub, felling trees, and scything other tall vegetation at Hinksey Heights Golf Club, the Coleshill Estate and Raleigh Park
- Planting wetland plants across various sites
- Floodplain mosaic creation with creating scrapes and temporary ponds
- Restoring species rich grassland through laying green hay at Coleshill Estate
- Other floodplain grassland restoration works involving the laying of green hay
- Clean water pond creation across the area

Fen restoration

The resources from the project have been used to work on three different fen sites, one being a SSSI site, Hinksey Heights Golf course, and another being Coleshill, which is part of the NT Estate. Due to a lack of grazing and other management these fen sites had become overgrown. As the planned habitat restoration and creation required short vegetation heights, a significant amount of the work has gone into scrub clearance and felling trees to restore the habitat features.

The restoration work on the fens focuses on mimicking historic grazing in the area, which is now non-existent as it became uneconomical after World War Two. The partnership project team has been able to deliver the fen restoration work that they sought to achieve on the three sites. The team were pleased with their progress and

shared that completing the removal of tall plants, such as reeds, will create a significant change in the environment as these taller plants have been drying out and smothering the fen plants.

Thanks to Nature Returns funding, they have been able to experiment with transferring hay with seeds still attached from a nearby Special Area of Conservation (SAC), in the hopes of reintroducing some rare moss species. They have also improved the fencing and perfected the timing of grazing to ensure proper management is sustained.

Floodplain mosaic habitat creation
Floodplain grassland restoration and floodplain wetland creation were key components of the work done on the Coleshill Estate, Manor Farm, Poplars Farm and Snipe Meadow.
The work at Coleshill Estate included creating scrapes and temporary ponds in addition to nearby species-rich grassland restoration. Green hay was used to create the species rich grassland, and the floodplain mosaic habitat creation works have been done for the floodplain surrounding the River Cole.
The floodplain mosaic work at Manor Farm, Poplars Farm and Snipe Meadow involve a series of pools dug into the floodplain but disconnected from the river network. This is due to the poor water quality, polluted by agricultural run-off and sewage. Instead they are fed by surface water from pastureland and groundwater which is naturally filtered by gravel.

Clean water pond creation
The clean water pond creation work was completed closer to the start of the project. There are many ponds scattered across the sites that aim to enhance water quality across the catchment area.

Floodplain Grassland Restoration
Floodplain grassland restoration works involving the laying of green hay occurred in Mill Meadow, Manor Farm and Poplars Farm. Floodplain meadows are now a rare habitat, as many have been converted into arable land or built over, leading to issues with flooding. It is hoped that these restoration works will improve the cultural and ecological value of the sites.

Monitoring
The evaluation monitoring survey results indicated that the project team conducted (and contracted) the following annual monitoring:

- vegetation surveys including species count,
- soil coring for organic carbon assessments,
- bird surveys,
- BNG metric assessment for all sites,
- and gas flux through the carbon and soil assessments.

The WS2 NE team have completed monitoring of carbon flux on the floodplain wetland and fenland sites. The Floodplain Conservation Officer along with team members from the NT conducted baseline species surveys. These surveys will be repeated periodically to track improvements.

The project team had ambitious monitoring plans and expanded their monitoring methods. As part of the partnership project, they have been monitoring hydrological changes on the fens. They facilitated a survey to monitor how the groundwater changed in an area. The data collection for this research was automated through a tube, called a Dipwell, installed in the ground that catalogued the water level. This research enabled the team to understand whether the restoration efforts worked as expected, i.e. whether the sites were getting wetter. One team member expressed that the automated monitoring allowed them to check the progress on the sites: *"*for us, it's a step forward into actually assessing if we're moving in the right direction*"* (partnership project interview).

One project member found that the funding for the Nature Returns programme is generous on staff time, and this has allowed the project officers to go beyond delivering the habitat restoration works and enable them to do a full botanical survey and/or hydrological surveys where possible.

Impacts

Many of the projects impacts on local biodiversity and carbon sequestration will be identified in the longer term. However, some short-term impacts have been reported:

- Habitat restoration work will have carbon sequestration benefits and help secure carbon already locked-away within the peatland sites.
- As part of the habitat restoration work, wetland plants such as marsh arrow grass, flat sedge, and creeping marsh were established on fen and floodplain mosaic sites. By increasing the plant biodiversity and improving the abiotic factors of the wetland habitats, the team hopes to see improvements for invertebrate and bird species diversity. The team also highlighted that the changes to the physical environment are stark.
- Notably, the floodplain creation work has had a very visual impact on the landscape, and improvement of public access as part of the project has been highly valued by the public.
- Prior to the project work, the site was a grassland, and now there are sizable ponds where water from nearby flooding can sit.
- Improved water quality is also an expected outcome of the floodplain mosaic work.
- Some early observations of ecological impacts include a greater interest from birds in the area, and one project member noted that they have had lapwings breeding on site for the first time, likely due to the addition of more clean water on the landscape.

The project team anticipate that the habitat creation will improve bird populations in the short-term, though changes in plants and invertebrates will be recognized in the long-term. The Nature Returns programme has effectively funded the nature conservation and habitat creation works for 12 years. The project team was excited to have these maintenance payments as the wetland habitats covered by the project are often overlooked or forgotten.

Challenges

The land available for habitat creation and restoration is subject to landowner engagement

Some activities have been changed since the application phase. Two of the initially included sites were removed due to some landowners cancelling the agreed upon plans. To overcome this barrier and still manage a significant impact, the money was reprofiled to allow more work to be carried out in one of the floodplain sites and they have also allocated more resource to monitoring.

Changes in project team structure
The project was initially structured around having a project manager and a project director, though the initial project manager had left their role at FWHT. FWHT had attempted to hire a replacement, though this proved to be difficult, and the team could not find a suitable replacement until April 2024. The project director stepped in to manage the project and the team have redistributed some of the management tasks such as monthly and quarterly reporting to NE. The project team has meetings every Monday to discuss and plan the project work.

Short timeline of the project
Members of the partnership project team highlighted that one-year timelines for the project created a challenge for completing the work due to unanticipated delays. It was also noted that project members would prefer a longer window for the project to have a higher impact. Some project members highlighted that having a longer-term project would also help with landowner engagement.

Insufficient management funds
The funding to cover site management for the subsequent 10 years after March 2025 is deemed to be insufficient by the project team to cover actual management costs. This is a particular risk for the fragile state of the floodplain meadow sites, which will quickly revert back to a *"*rank and boring*"* environment without the right management (partnership project interview).

Delays from weather events and ecological timescales
Weather and ecological timescales have impacted the floodplain conservation work. In the first year, the team had waited to mid-August to start some work to avoid interfering with the bird breeding season. Once work commenced, wet weather caused issues such as the excavator's dump trucks sinking into the ground. To mitigate the risks posed by the weather the team has remained flexible and did as much as they could before the end of December that year.

Delays due to heavy rain continued into 2025. At the time of writing the team were waiting to resume floodplain work once there was a dry window which worked alongside farming activities for the participating land manager.

Heavy rain also delayed some of the floodplain work, and when there was finally a window for the work to go ahead, the farmer required that window to be used for other activities. They are wating for another dry window, and will have to reallocate funds from the work on the remaining 0.13 ha if one does not present itself.
Further, there was flooding on the fens that had caused the team to cancel one of their conservation work events, which the team calls a 'volunteer work party' (definition and further description of FWHT volunteer work parties and their purpose can be found in section 1.2.4 Stakeholder engagement). One partnership project team member shared in interview that in December 2023, some of the volunteer work parties needed to be cancelled due to access issues: *"*the fen was completely underwater, so it wasn't safe.*"* When the sites are inaccessible, there are fewer volunteers, which slows down habitat

restoration work. Though interview data showed that project members felt that the flooding had not prevented them from completing the work that they were meant to do.

Delays from planning permissions and work with contractors
Permissions for work were noted as a challenge for the project team. The difficulty of the permissions was due to increased administrative time for the project team. The tasks included general planning permissions, flood permits, and archaeological permissions. Some of the wetlands require FWHT to receive full planning permission, which was viewed as "a bit of a minefield", due to the required volume of documentation and sequencing of administrative steps (partnership project interview). This led to prioritisation of sites and features which did not require permitting, such as scrapes with ditches under the FRAP exemption. Some colleagues at FWHT who had experience in obtaining permits in the past were able to have more accurate expectations and support the partnership project team during the process and answer questions. The team also implemented learning from the first year of Nature Returns, ensuring permits were sought early.

The team also experienced some delays with contractors when it came to felling trees from ash dieback. This is due to the time that it took to find a suitable contractor and the delays that resulted from flooding in the area. With the felling of the trees, it could be difficult as many parties needed to be communicated with, including the sub-contractors, the landowners, and the Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire Wildlife Trust. Other delays were caused by the unforeseen amount of time needed to seek permission for accessing adjacent land to get to the partnership project sites. One example of this occurred when FWHT needed to pass through a nearby grassland which was owned by the Oxford Conservation Trusts (OCT). However, team members felt that this became an opportunity to discuss the Nature-based Solutions (NbS) work and build connections.

Blended finance

The finance for the project has been procured from a variety of sources. Partnership project documents show that in addition to the grant from the Nature Returns programme, the partnership project has blended funding coming from the District Level Licensing for Great crested Newts (DLL), Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), and the Natural Environment Investment Readiness Fund project (NEIRF). The project also has used existing match funding from Thames Water Enforcement with funds provided by Buckinghamshire County Council and DLL for habitat creation.

The project manager highlighted that they had been involved in a lot of work surrounding green and private finance that was external to the Nature Returns project. For example, they had been successful with a Landscape Recovery bid which is focused on private finance. In the past, the project team have gained experience with exploring blended finance through securing the Nature Environment Investment Readiness Fund (NEIRF).

FWHT were hoping to refer landowners to Countryside Stewardship (CS) and the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) going forwards. If they were to still be funded under Nature Returns, this would not be possible, so the Nature Returns payments have now been removed from the Hinksey Heights site to allow it to be entered into CS, as this presents a better financial opportunity.

Interviewees from FWHT highlighted the flexibility of Nature Returns funding, which is much less restrictive than other government grants. Revenue payments have been particularly useful in allowing landowners to be compensated up-front.

FWHT commissioned a report describing baseline carbon and biodiversity values of the floodplains and fens in Oxfordshire, alongside their potential market values, marketisation opportunities and possible methods for validating the carbon baseline values. The work has since been completed, and will feed into the Landscape Recovery project for the Ock and Thame catchments, while opening opportunities for future blended finance.

In interviews within the first programme year, the project team stated that while this funding is used to support the financing of FWHT projects, they felt unclear about what the expectations around blended finance were for the wider Nature Returns programme. The project team were aware that there had been two online forums for partnership projects organised by NE during the first programme year, though the project manager had not attended due to illness and time/resource issues. However, during 2024/2025, two members of the FWHT team attended face-to-face sessions in Derby and Northumberland, and one attended the Plymouth Board meeting session in July 2024, suggesting increased engagement in this aspect of the programme.

Dissemination of learning from the partnership project

The project team shared that they have made dissemination a key focus area for the project. One partnership project team member expressed in interview that, *"we are really wanting to raise the profile of the project."* The team has been communicating the importance of floodplain habitats to the general public through signposting, social media, blog posts, short films, as well as participating in talks and other networking events.

The partnership project team highlighted that alkaline fens and floodplains are lesser-known habitats, which can require more communication and engagement to get people interested. One team member shared in interview that:
"The habitats we work with, in Freshwater Habitats Trust, they are not the most charismatic. People like grasslands and woodlands… But you cannot really walk your dog on a fen or have picnic on a flooded floodplain."

- The team has attended a few Upper Thames Farmer Cluster meetings at Coleshill. The meetings were led by the Wildlife Trust and the Floodplain Conservation Officer attended to talk about wetland habitats with the farmers and provide management advice.
- The team created short film for the GroWet initiative that was filmed in various stages of the project. There has been engagement with fen restoration to increase public understanding.
- The team shared a video of the Freshwater Habitats Trust CEO Jeremy Biggs and the Freshwater Network, reaching 1,930 views.
- The team conducted an interview with a farmer to explore their views on the Nature Returns programme and published it on their website and newsletter.
- As part of the community engagement works, team members communicate the details of the project through social media. On these platforms, project members have been able to share information about fen habitats and carbon sequestration and promote the GroWet scheme. The project team have also been able to tap into the marketing efforts of local libraries with many sharing their wetland habitat material in addition to recruiting volunteers.

- FWHT have shared the success of GroWet in several events, engaging a variety of interested parties such as HS2, Lindengate Action4Youth and Lindengate Carers Group.
- Additionally, there was a short film produced that explains FWHT role on the habitat restoration for the Hinksey Heights site. The work at Hinksey Heights is also highlighted on the website: https://hinkseytrail.org/conservation/.
- When the team does work with the community on the fen sites, they put up signs and share leaflets so that whenever people see them working, they will want to learn and get involved. In addition to social media and signposting, members of the project team have hosted events and talks that focus on wetlands and the benefits for both wildlife and humans.

Members of the project team mentioned that they had not received clear steer from the Nature Returns programme team on communication outputs from the project. Specifically, partnership project team members were not initially familiarised with the Nature Returns Comms Campaign.

In the second year of the programme, involvement increased to an extent, with the Nature Returns Communications team coming in to shoot some footage. They now tag Nature Returns in social media posts and news releases and share their own footage with the Nature Returns Communications team. However, they were still constrained by the lack of resources allocated to marketing and communications within FWHT.

Stakeholder engagement

Land Managers

To complete the works of the project, the Freshwater Habitats Trust has engaged a variety of landowners, including the NT, the Buckinghamshire-Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust, and the Hinksey Heights Golf Club. The FWHT had been working with these landowners prior to the Nature Returns project. One of the conservation officers stated that they "have been lucky to have really supportive landowners." The project team has been in regular contact with the landowners through emails and meetings, and this has been viewed positively by the land managers spoken to:
*"*Every different group brings something different to the project*"* (partnership project interview).

Engaging the National Trust:
Coleshill, one of the project sites, is owned by the NT Estate. The NT also has a variety of landowners under lease on their land, and many of these landowners are shifting their land-use from agriculture to be used for nature conservation and rewilding. The NT interviewee shared that for the Nature Returns project they had been approached by FWHT with the idea for the work, and they already had the funding in place, so it was a streamlined process for the NT. The working relationship has been quite close as the NT team will share advice and help run work volunteer parties, as well as sharing vehicles with the FWHT team. This shared effort is reflected in the FWHT communications. For example, FWHT tag the NT in all social media posts they make about the Coleshill site.

The Fen Creation Officer emphasized that their positive working relationship with the NT may be attributable to their shared goals for improving the local environment:

"We're offering improvement of the carbon storage of your land and working with their volunteers and bringing in new areas… I think that fits in well with their objectives." This was reflected in the conversation with the NT team member where they highlighted that they have their own targets for nature recovery and are keen to implement NbS.

Engaging Buckinghamshire-Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust:
The FWHT officers have been interacting with the BBOWT to share expertise and experience with habitat creation methods and volunteer engagement. The BBOWT has provided support for the FWHT team on the green hay work that had been done in the semi-natural grassland. There has been a two-way exchange of knowledge across the two organizations as FWHT have also shared their experience with fen management. The FWHT team have also engaged landowners that reside within the BBOWT sites and discussed opportunities to manage wetland habitats and promote biodiversity. These conversations have occurred at farm cluster meetings hosted by BBOWT. The Floodplain Conservation Officer found that in many instances the landowners are quite "biodiversity conscious" and were wanting to learn about how to manage the wetlands on their land.

Engaging Hinksey Heights Golf Club:
Hinksey Heights Golf Club has been owned by the same family for a long time and was engaged by the FWHT in 2017. The landowner stated that FWHT has been consistently contributing to the restoration work on their land for the past six years, and the Nature Returns programme has continued to support this work. Prior to this collaboration, the landowner had been interested in recovering the fen on their land as it had been completely ignored since 2002. The landowner stated that FHWT ″led the charge″ on restoring the alkaline fens on their land, and now that they are ″perfectly comfortable″ with FWHT due to the clear communication provided by the team and their regular delivery of high-quality work. The landowner stressed that they had contributed a lot to the site including growing volunteer numbers and providing regular maintenance in a controlled and reliable manner. The landowner mentioned that they prefer to allow organizations and groups to get involved on the site that ″know their subject″. The landowner shared the partnership project team have been adding a scientific component to the work that they are doing through monitoring as part of the Nature Returns programme.

FWHT have conducted monitoring and developed subsequent reports for the Hinkey Heights site over the past six years. The monitoring conducted on this site as part of the Nature Returns partnership project will add to this evidence base and allow support the next report. The landowner highlighted that they welcome the scientific inputs and reporting. The reporting from FWHT will be used as a tool to identify biodiversity and carbon benefits on the site that may be used for carbon finance or biodiversity payments.

The landowner noted that FWHT has been great to work with, as compared to other local charities, because they are excellent with providing regular communication. FWHT communicates with the senior chair, the nature trail volunteers and keeps the landowner up to date on activities.

Local stakeholders and communities
The project involves the local community in the wetland habitat creation and restoration work in a variety of ways with the goal of engaging local individuals in

actions that will contribute to climate mitigation and promote biodiversity. Project team members emphasised in interview that they wanted to provide opportunities that *"*allow people to actually do something*."* The Community Engagement Officer shared that they intentionally created a wide range of activities to ensure that people with different interests could get involved. The activities vary from those that focus on physical work on sites, gardening at home, engaging with plant science, or connecting through creative activities.

Ways in which the partnership project has engaged with local stakeholders and community include:

- GroWet Campaign– initiative for volunteers to grow and establish wetland plants
- 'Work parties' - volunteer workdays for habitat restoration and creation
- School engagement events – hands-on engagement activities including sowing seeds and re-potting to promote awareness of local wetland issues in school children.
- Creative works – organised activities for volunteers to engage with the project through poetry or artwork
- Cutteslowe Greenhouse Sessions – volunteer event to learn about plant species, care and propagation.
- Big Day for Nature – a big event hosted on an annual basis to get families together to learn about wetland habitats

The Community engagement officer leads a variety of work with one of the key initiatives being the GroWet campaign. GroWet is an initiative where members of the local community are engaged in the project by growing wetland plants at home and later planting them into the wetland landscape to support habitat restoration and promote flora diversity. To facilitate GroWet, the Community Engagement Officer partnered with 16 hubs around Oxfordshire to serve as stations where volunteers can go to collect the rare plants. Over the first year of Nature Returns they were able to recruit 136 people through using the libraries marketing services. The FWHT have also been working with experts on the GroWet initiative to ensure that the rare plants are being cared for properly.
FWHT also hosts 'work parties' where volunteers come out to the sites which have public access. The work parties occur once a month and these are facilitated by FWHT. Tools, such as scythes and rakes, have been provided for the volunteer groups to enable them to do the works. Staff from FWHT have been deployed to help in these sessions to facilitate the work that revolves around the alkaline fens. The project team feel that scything has been a great way to engage people, as it is a lost art that people enjoy participating in.

The Community Engagement Officer had also brought in a local creative to help facilitate poetry and art sessions. They viewed this as a great opportunity for people to try new things and cater to different interests of volunteers.

At Hinksey Heights, the project team ran the Big Nature Day in May of 2023 and again in May 2024. The Big Nature Day includes a variety of activities including a pond dipping day that is run for families, where children can learn about pond habitats and organisms through exploring what they find in the ponds.

A workshop was conducted by the evaluation team with three members of the community who participated in the GroWet campaign and work parties. All community members highlighted that the FWHT were doing a great job in expanding the

engagement with the community by providing exciting and diverse activities. The community members benefited from the variety of activities, with some preferring the art and poetry sessions alongside the volunteering with others preferring the more physical work such as the scything part of fen restoration. All community members involved in the GroWet campaign enjoyed learning about their plants and found the process straightforward. Due to these positive experiences, the volunteers were planning to continue their engagement into the future.

Community impacts

- Increased community engagement through a variety of activities
- Benefits for physical health and well-being
- Knowledge sharing about wetland plants and freshwater habitats

One of the impacts of the project thus far has been the increase in volunteer engagement. Especially as the volunteer work party at Coleshill had been created through the project. The project team had set up initial conversations with the NT rangers and conducted a volunteer taster session. Since these primary engagements went well, the team had set up the monthly work parties and this was seen as a successful impact of the project.

At the conclusion of the first GroWet round, it was found that 3/5 species were successfully propagated by volunteers, and surveys highlighted beneficial outcomes for participants, with 82% reporting a positive outcome for caring for the plants, 77% agreeing that the scheme changed the way they look at freshwater habitats and 91% feeling part of a collective effort to help protect them.

Project members viewed the engagement of community members as having a positive impact on the volunteers themselves as well as on the habitats they have restored. By engaging the volunteers in the fen restoration, they are able to benefit from getting time outdoors in nature as well as health benefits associated with physical activity. The project team emphasised that improved wellbeing was a key outcome from the volunteer activities through connecting people with nature. One volunteer who is disabled fed back to the Community Engagement Officer and shared that for them, the GroWet initiative “really helped me in a really hard time.”

Other volunteers have shared that they enjoy the variety of activities and have found that the community engagement officer is doing a good job of creating a snowball effect and getting more and more people involved in the project.

Programme collaboration

The FWHT team stated that they had not engaged much with the programme team throughout the first year of the project. One project member shared in interview that the programme team felt initially *“far removed”* from the project work. There had been an instance where the project manager attended a session with the programme team that focused on improving project management, though this was found to be less relevant for the work that they were delivering.

In the second year, perception of the programme collaboration significantly improved, and interviewees from FWHT found communications with their project advisor particularly good. However, they did suggest that the structure of funding could be

improved, as the current requirement of allocating funding by specific feature and site limits flexibility.

The team felt there had been many opportunities for knowledge exchange across partnership projects, but the diversity in activities and geographical spread limited the scope and feasibility of co-learning. They found collaboration is most useful when partners are engaging in similar activities, or if opportunities for cross-collaboration on individual projects become available.

Lessons learned

For programme partners and funder

- Set out clearer expectations for responsibilities and outcomes from blended finance and continue communication to ensure a shared understanding as the project evolves. Develop comprehensive guidelines and criteria outlining the expectations for blended finance projects. Clearly define the roles, responsibilities, and outcomes expected from both partners and funders involved in the Nature Returns programme.
- Develop programme marketing materials earlier on in the project timeline. Nature Returns communications material was developing throughout the course of the project, and community engagement officers would need the materials early on to create a more regular and streamlined campaign to share through their platforms. Ensure that communication strategies are aligned with project goals and that community engagement officers have access to materials well in advance to facilitate effective outreach campaigns.
- Short application windows create difficulties for projects that are aiming to involve private landowners in the habitat restoration/creation works. Consider extending application windows to accommodate projects involving private landowners. Allow sufficient time for negotiation and flexibility in agreements to prevent potential withdrawals or replacements. This will foster stronger partnerships and commitment from all involved parties.

For the partnership project team

- Incorporate buffer periods into project timelines to account for potential delays caused by weather, contractor availability, and regulatory processes. Implement a staggered delivery approach to enhance flexibility and resilience against unforeseen challenges.
- Allocate more support to community engagement. The scale of the community engagement work is massive and greatly contributes to the success of the project. This would benefit from having more support so that the reach can continue to expand.
- Enhanced communication with landowners. Foster transparent and regular communication with landowners to strengthen relationships and promote project engagement. Provide clear expectations regarding landowner involvement and communicate potential challenges or opportunities to facilitate proactive collaboration.

Next steps

Before March 2025, there is some outstanding habitat work to be completed, including scrapes at Manor Farm. Going forward, FWHT hopes to continue working with all the landowners, with whom good relationships have been built. Some continued

collaboration is already planned due to additional funding streams. Monitoring work will also continue on some of the more interesting sites, funded by FWHT's core budget.

Partnership project Case Study: Plymouth's Natural Grid

Lead organisation: Plymouth City Council
This case study is based on interviews with four delivery team members and one community workshop with volunteers from the Friends of Radford Woods and reports submitted by the project team to NE.

Overview

The £1,291,669 Nature Returns funding for the Plymouth Natural Grid (PNG) partnership project has been used to support Plymouth City Council (PCC), working with the National Trust (NT), to restore natural habitats and promote local Nature-based Solutions (NbS) for climate change. The partnership project set out to cover an array of habitats including wood pasture, species rich grassland, woodland, saltmarsh, and floodplain mosaic habitats, alongside kilometres of hedgerow planting.

The vision for the PNG Nature Returns partnership project was to address the most pressing impacts of the climate and biodiversity crises for local citizens. To address these environmental and social issues, the council established a Joint Local Plan (JLP) and the Plymouth Urban Pioneer Partnership that pairs together the PCC and the NT. Through these partnerships and the Nature Returns Programme, the partnership project aimed to emphasise local solutions to promote community benefits through improved green and blue space, e.g. improved well-being benefits and natural cooling effects. The partnership project team had a clear vision of which public green and blue spaces could create health improvements for society.

In the past, the PNG project team have successfully engaged over 30,000 members of the public and has increased momentum in the area through their recent completion of a Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF) project. It was through the GRCF that the project team was set up, which includes a combination of PCC staff for programme management and communications as well as rangers from the NT to carry out the habitat management works.
The project set out to cover 111.12 ha of PCC land across eight sites. Each site was outlined to have a variety of habitat creation and restoration work with 6-7 interventions occurring per site in the first programme year.

Factors of success

- A clear plan from the outset which enabled the team, sites, and tools to be set up prior to works beginning
- Clear lines of regular open communication with project manager and project director
- Involved and keen project team with regular meetings and a sociable workplace culture
- The project is very well resourced and the team are able to acquire the tools that are needed
- Training and knowledge sharing has been a key component of the success of the project

Progress, outcomes and expected impacts

Habitat creation and restoration

Progress

As per their final report of 2025, the project team have completed all planned habitat work.

The team felt prepared to *"hit the ground running"* at the start of the programme and managed to have everything in place in terms of the team, vehicles, and tools (partnership project interview). Each of the NT area rangers had been given a site to focus on. For these sites the NT area rangers have been involved in planning, delivering, and engaging the community with the conservation tasks.

Table A6.4. Habitat restoration and creation.

Habitat type	Target (ha/m)	Amount completed as of End of Year Report (April 2025) (Ha/m)
Fen	0.17	0.17
Floodplain	9.21	9.21
Saltmarsh	0.26	0.26
Scrub	1.06	0.45
Semi-natural grassland	1.74	1.74
Wood pasture	78.84	55.40
Broadleaved woodland	29.69	29.69
Total	120.97	96.92
Hedgerow	4,032m	2,751m

Work completed includes:

- Wood pasture creation at Seaton Valley through planting, understory planting and putting tree shelters in place,
- Wildflower sowing at Hamwoods,
- Natural flood management (NFM) through installation of leaky dams,
- Woodland thinning and cutting back scrub,
- Wetland habitat management through addition of scrapes.
- Hedge planting in several locations

Some plans were adapted to ensure interventions were sustainable. For example, the wood pasture at Seaton Valley was underplanted with thorny understory in larger tree shelters than was originally the plan, in order to provide deer protection once the shelters get dismantled. Furthermore, some of the scrub control and hedge planting work at the Trefusis Park site has been postponed until after March 2025, due to the development of a SuDS scheme which has prevented the commencement of work. Funding will be reallocated to other sites or used for personnel costs.

The Efford Marsh site was found by the NE field teams to be quite difficult to monitor and shared with the project team that they don't typically monitor saltmarsh

ecosystems unless it is a control site. Interview data found that project team members felt that the site may not be useful for the Nature Returns programme, as they would not be able to collect a robust dataset for the site. Due to this uncertainty, the decision of whether or not to proceed with work on the site was delayed and then weather further postponed the habitat restoration plans for Efford Marsh. This work was postponed until the 2024/2025 programme year and has since been completed. The main focus in the 2024/2025 objectives was hedgerows, partly as the team are wary of undertaking activities which could compromise their Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) applications or their habitat bank.

Impacts

Most impacts on the local ecology will be measurable on longer timescales, though initial impacts include:

- The NFM works were seen to have already altered the flow of the water course in terms of direction and volume. Exeter University conducted a study on the effectiveness of the leaky dams and the recent release of beavers in the area and found that the peak flow rates have been dramatically reduced, which was viewed as a big win. This data will enable the council to roll out this NFM model across Plymouth, adding to the SuDS schemes which are already in place around the city. Project team members commented that:

*"*There's a statistical significance from having those structures in place, [they're] affecting volume… there is housing at the bottom the stream, which is susceptible to flooding, so that will then help alleviate those flood impacts*"* (partnership project interview).

- Training and upskilling have been an ongoing focus, with the project aiming to upskill both the PCC field teams and the NT rangers. Some Nature Returns funding, which was originally assigned to fund contractors, has been re-allocated to fund this training. It is felt that the training will promote resilience within the PCC team.
- The project team has a photographer allocated who has captured before and after photos of the works completed. The team has been able to note their impact through these visual changes.
- The team have been able to experiment with NFM interventions to establish best practice, and are offering a hydrology course for rangers and apprentices which will involve intervention design and siting.

The project team expect that the floodplain mosaic habitat improvements will promote recovery of ground flora and result in increased abundance of aquatic organisms and birds. The works on bramble scrub cutting were also thought to create temporary benefits by providing open areas in the summer to benefit invertebrates, as they will have more basking opportunities.

Monitoring

The team have completed initial baseline surveys for vegetation and soil quality, and they have subsequently run mammal surveys to support identification of impacts from the works completed. A project team member shared that they were looking at the condition of the sites using the biodiversity metric and condition assessment sheets, with the most anticipated changes for biodiversity to occur in the grasslands and watercourses.

There will be annual inspections and maintenance checks in these areas. However, one project member recognised that there will not be funding in place to do many ecological surveys beyond the funded period. It was also noted that putting in sensors to monitor the impacts on the works related to water volume can be high-risk due to prevalence of vandalism in the area.

Natural England (NE) have been on site conducting work for the carbon flux monitoring. This has been found to be very beneficial as the council may not have the capacity or expertise to complete this work independently. NE have also expressed interest in monitoring the methane emissions of the grazing cattle in the area for their ongoing research on carbon.

Challenges

Challenges to habitat restoration and creation plans centred around:

Procurement of resources between PCC and NT

It was raised by partnership project members that it can be challenging to manage project expenses between PCC and NT due to a lack of a streamlined process between the two partners. For instance, there is no shared account or debit card for purchasing project materials, and as a result the project spending is tracked through spreadsheets shared by PCC and NT. The council report the spending to NE through reporting, and at times the differing PCC and NT processes caused delays leading to more time used for administrative work.

Initial challenges with installing leaky dams

Early in the project, some of the leaky dams were damaged during high flow events. This was thought to be caused by the size of timber being too big, material used for securing the timber (hemp), and poorly selected location for the dams. After some of the leaky dams had washed away during high flow events, the team had internal discussions on how to be more strategic in designing and installing the leaky dams. After gaining knowledge on these features, the team were able to create more stable and efficient dams. In addition to making the dams more stable, the team has explored different ways of installing them to promote fish swims (organic spaces for fish to swim through). The team has used ash from their recent felling for ash dieback to create fish swims.

Some community groups were more engaged than others

Friends Groups provided a significant amount of labour to contribute to the habitat restoration and creation work for the partnership project. On sites where there was less engagement it was more difficult to carry out the work, compared to sites that had a very engaged Friends Groups. On the sites where there was less community engagement, the project team still hosted volunteer days and continued to work towards engaging more volunteers.

Loss of National Trust staff

Two NT staff left their positions once their contracts came to an end, and the partnership project team are struggling to find replacements for the remaining three months of the programme. Additionally, the in-depth local knowledge they had has therefore been lost, and the team dynamic has been altered. On the other hand, the team have managed to promote an apprenticeship posting into a more permanent job, which has been beneficial.

Deer damage

The team expressed their surprise as to the scale of damage exerted on trees and hedgerows by deer within the urban environment. Some hedgerows had to be replanted due to deer damage, and protections were improved to mitigate against further impacts.

Blended finance

The blended finance portion of the project is viewed by the project team as an opportunity to create job stability for the project team. The project work and studies will tie into securing funding through BNG, Ocean City Diversity, and a habitat banking vehicle (HBV), which is currently in development. Additionally, the council has invested roughly £500,000 in the HBV.

Finance Earth is a consultancy that has been leading the way in securing the habitat banking vehicle for PCC, although not through the Nature Returns programme. The habitat banking vehicle and carbon credits resulting from the habitat creation and restoration efforts in Plymouth will involve various organisations such as the Forestry Commission, and these groups have all been brought together to determine financial opportunities.

PCC is viewed as a leader in setting up these methods for blended finance, and other local authorities have been learning from their example, including through presentations delivered by PCC. The outlook for the HBV is thought to be promising and financially viable, though the benefits will likely come through in thirty years' time. Because this will require long-term thinking, the council has been enabled to view their work more holistically as well to see how work on each site will fit into their bigger goals across timescales. These projects have the potential to fit into 15-1,500-year management plans.

The project team have identified three partnership project sites to include for BNG, and they are aware of what units this will generate. While the Nature Returns sites cannot currently be counted for biodiversity unit delivery, after the 10 years of maintenance funding, they will be able to qualify.

PNG are working with the WS4 team on various blended finance activities, including the action learning workshops. Regular contact with the blended finance team has catalysed exploration of future opportunities, including indication of a potential future partnership.

Dissemination of learning from the partnership project

To communicate the project work with the public, PCC have installed interpretation signs which explain what the habitat is and why it is being managed in a certain way. For example, where they have planted trees near watercourses, the interpretation signs elaborate how trees are useful for flood mitigation. There have also been various forms of media created to communicate the work of the project including short films and weekly posts to social media (LinkedIn, Instagram and Facebook). The project has an Instagram account that is ran by PCC and support from one of the NT rangers that has been particularly keen on social media.

The team have commissioned a short and long-form video illustrating the various practical activities which the team have carried out, including the monitoring work from the field teams.

The communications campaign for Nature Returns was initially thought to be unclear. The project team highlighted that they felt that they did not know what the programme was aiming to cover, and it would have been preferable for there to be more foresight into how partnership projects would communicate this with the wider community. The team shared that they asked for communications resources early on from the Nature Returns programme team such as branding and templates. When these were not provided by the programme team, the PCC team created their own marketing and communications material. At the time NE created their Nature Returns Communications strategy, the project team had already set up their own strategy and did not feel compelled to change their material.

However, as the programme progressed, regular meetings between the Nature Returns and the PNG communications teams enabled greater strategy alignment, and they have found the Nature Returns Communication campaign more useful.

Stakeholder engagement

PNG exceeded their first-year engagement target, delivering twice as many hours of engagement activities as was originally planned and strengthening relationships with Friends groups at Radford Woods, Efford Marsh and Budshead Woods.

External stakeholders

The project team has collaborated with various external stakeholders, including the Devon Mammal Group, Environment Agency, and the NT team in North Devon. The Environment Agency has played a significant role in the NFM work, and has been instrumental in securing permissions for the project. Additionally, the project is affiliated with the Plymouth Community Forest and the South Devon Forests.

Close partnerships are maintained within PCC with their other projects such as the Green Community Hub Project, a collaborative effort between the council and the NT covering the western portion of the city. Furthermore, the project team members closely coordinate with the Parks Department of PCC to ensure alignment and effective communication regarding the project sites.

Local Community

The project team has worked diligently to include the local community in the works of the projects since the project sites are solely on public land. One project team member emphasised that they want to get volunteers involved with tangible climate action: *"*I think especially because there's so much anxiety around climate change and so it's just making them feel like they are empowered within their local space*"* (partnership project interview).

The community engagement aspect of the project focused on:

- Engaging the local community in climate action and reducing climate anxiety.
- Well-attended drop-in sessions in libraries aimed at families and centred around climate resilience and green spaces.
- Upskilling the community with green skills as passed on from the NT rangers.

- Involving the local community in the decision making around habitat restoration and increasing public awareness of project works and the benefits of NbS.
- Making project sites more accessible to the public.
- Continuing existing work with Dementia Cafes and initiatives to alleviate social issues, such as loneliness.
- Other activities focused on ecotherapy and wellbeing, such as the "Wild and Well" day at the community farm which was attended by around 200 people.
- Development of a digital badges/certificates scheme in partnership with NT and Poole Farm staff, attracting many young people to the farm.
- Community farm bootcamps for local adult education initiatives, promoting environmental careers.

As the programme progressed, the team became focused on strategically branching out to new audiences such as those attending the community farm bootcamps. They have also been working to improve existing relationships with the Friends Groups. However, the team noted that events are resource intensive, and there is only so much engagement work that can be accommodated alongside the habitat management work.

Friends Groups

There were four sites that had been used for public engagement: Budshead, Efford Marsh, Ham Woods, and Radford Woods. Each of these sites had been selected due to previous public engagement. Each of the four sites also had an associated Friends Group at the start of the partnership project, though the Efford Marsh Friends Group had been recently dismantled. The Friends Groups are viewed as key for completing the habitat restoration/creation work for the sites as they *"*bridge the gaps*"* where the rangers cannot complete the work without support (partnership project interview).

Engagement with the friends groups looked different across the sites. For instance, the Budshead site was selected because the project team had previous interactions with the Budshead Friends Group through their recent GRCF project.

In the case of the Friends of Radford Woods Group, the relationship between Plymouth City Council and the group has been historically uneasy due to disagreement over previous land management decisions. Due to the positive partnership of the NT and the Plymouth County Council, the presence of NT rangers on the site has helped to diffuse historical tensions and help to restore trust for the friends group that the land management decisions are made consciously and collaboratively with the group. The relationship has also been improved through the dedicated efforts of the communications and engagement officer. For example, at the start of the project, the communications and engagement officer attended a Friends of Radford Woods meeting to introduce themself and share the intended project works. Since then, the project team has found that the Friends of Radford Woods has been *"*really enthusiastic and really supportive*"* of the project team (partnership project interview).

The project team has also allocated one NT Ranger to each community engagement site so that there is the potential to build relationships. They have begun focusing on engaging with new people and those who feel most positive towards PCC to build rapport with the community, an approach that they feel has been effective.

The evaluation workshop

A workshop was conducted by the evaluation team with seven volunteers from the Friends of the Radford Woods group who were involved with the habitat restoration at

the site. This workshop aimed to understand how community members had engaged with the PNG partnership project and what initial impacts have come from the project work. All workshop participants shared that in the past they had felt that the council's work at Radford Woods had been poorly communicated and there were occasions where the Friends Group members disagreed with management methods, such as cutting down trees or leaving brambles unmanaged. Though, due to the increased communication through the project team, relationships had improved, and the project team had been very accessible during workdays, community events, and Friends Group meetings.

Community Impacts

PNG collected data regarding engagement throughout the first year of the project through people counters, appreciative enquiry, semi-structured exit interviews and surveys. Results showed an overwhelmingly positive reaction from participants who engaged in activities facilitated by them, with 98% of volunteers reporting they felt like they made a difference and were more connected to or closer to nature after volunteering, and 92% feeling like they had learnt new skills or knowledge about nature.

Improving the local community's relationship with the council

The area ranger noted that they had received positive feedback from the community, especially in response to communication surrounding the work that has been done as part of the project.

Historically, the council and the local community groups have not had a positive relationship due to lack of communication around conservation works. Often community members felt that the council would start works that they wouldn't finish or cut down trees without adequate reason. Many of the project members mentioned that having the NT involved on the project works has created a buffer, and helped the public to shape the outlook for the Nature Returns project.

*"*So when they see [the National Trust] rangers in red and all, they're like, 'oh, they'll be doing good. And so that breaks down the barriers straight away with the public*."* - Community member

Additionally, the communications done by the engagement and communications officer have enabled the community members to know what work they can expect on the public sites. One workshop participant shared that they found it beneficial to focus their volunteering work on specific sites:

*"*There's a new, more positive relationship between us and between PCC and kind of community groups. And I think that's basically because we've been able to concentrate on sites. So the projects are obviously very specific about why we're doing things. But as before, the council have got a lot of green space to manage and they just don't have the time or resource to focus a lot of attention or activity in one place*"* (partnership project interview).

Involving the local community in the decision making around habitat restoration.

The project team have been addressing the previously poor relationship between the council and community groups through increased communication and focus on inclusive decision making about the partnership project sites. The project team prioritised labelling trees that needed to be removed for health and safety reasons

(e.g. ash dieback) with orange dots so that prior to the tree being cut down the community can have a better idea as to why this needed to happen. Additionally, the project team installed interpretation signs around the sites which explain what leaky woody dams are and how they can support flood mitigation. The project team have also placed interpretation signs at the entrances of sites which have the most foot fall.

Increased access in response to community member's needs
One key benefit of the community engagement has been providing site access in direct response to community input. Throughout the project there were several instances where a community member raised an issue related to access and the project team was able to respond quickly and ensure that those with mobility issues were able to use the sites.

Examples of improved access include:

- The Budshead volunteer group shared that there was a part of the footpath through the site that did not have a sufficient number of benches. The project team and the volunteer group worked collaboratively to install a bench where some volunteers and community members had found there to be a prohibitively large break between seating areas.
- In Radford Woods there was a need for a handrail in one of the areas, some of the visitors had previously fallen where at times it had been slippery.
- In Efford Marsh, two of the very involved volunteers messaged a project team member to request that one of the volunteer days should focus on clearing the brush by a path that had been overgrown. The project team stated that these two volunteers often worked closely with the area ranger that was assigned to Efford Marsh.

Engaging with a wider variety of people
The addition of drop-in volunteer sessions and especially posting events on Eventbrite has brought in local students to engage where they can. This has been beneficial for students who want to learn practical skills tied to habitat restoration and for the volunteer groups in that there can be increased age diversity for the group. With the Radford Woods Friend Group, often with the volunteering it is older or retired people who have more time to participate. Getting young people involved with the project has been seen as a challenge, particularly without financial incentive. To overcome this barrier, the project team has focused on providing apprenticeships for those interested in habitat creation/restoration who are in early career stages. Some project team members felt that they would also be able to engage a wider variety of people with increased prioritisation of community engagement, potentially by growing the number of staff in this area of the team.

Sharing knowledge of Nature-based Solutions
Spreading knowledge on NbS has been seen as a positive for the project team. Project team members shared that many volunteers have learned about the benefits of NbS, such as woodland thinning.

Interview data showed that the project team would have liked more communications from the NbS programme team. The project team shared that it would be useful to have had communication materials earlier on for making Instagram posts, in the sense that the material could be copy and pasted into their social media campaign. It was said that it would also be useful to have a standard interpretation of NbS and a bit of a

more unified message from the programme to communicate to stakeholders and community members.

Programme collaboration

The project team reported that they had a very good working relationship with the NE Nature Returns programme team. The team has found there to be an informal relationship with NE that worked well. The programme team have even been renting their hayloft for regional meetings. The project team members shared that they enjoyed collaborating with the NE field team on the soil sampling for carbon analysis. "[The NE team that came to help with the carbon monitoring] are absolutely incredible. they were so good at bringing that wider context to our team and taking them out and doing the soil coring… I absolutely love working with [that] team" (partnership project interview.

The project team has collaborated with the Exmoor partnership project in North Devon. This collaboration involved a residential week in summer 2023 in Exmoor where the project teams learnt from one another and studied different topics on NbS. It was felt that this week worked well for building relationships and peer to peer learning. The project partnership forums are the most common medium for knowledge exchange for PNG, and the team felt that although all types were useful, the in-person events facilitated the most activity. However, they noted that due to the reduced funding over the second half of the programme, there had been less opportunity for knowledge exchange.

Lessons learned

For the programme partners:

- Initiation of the Nature Returns Communications Campaign and availability of communication materials when the partnership projects commenced would have been beneficial. Specifically producing tailored background information on NbS for partnership projects to share with a variety of stakeholder types. Materials should be prepared prior to the start of the programme so that the partnership projects have sufficient time to communicate this information with the public throughout the course of the programme.
- Set clearer timelines for the project work and expectations for delivery. Additional guidance on timeframes could allow project members to understand how they are progressing and whether this is meeting the expectations of the overall programme.

For the project team:

- Continued learning about habitat restoration/creation methods throughout the project worked well and allowed the project team to adaptively react to challenges. Having internal conversations and sharing learning across the team enabled the team members to improve their installation methods and allowed for development of expertise and skill building for team members.
- Whilst the project team were prepared to start the project when it kicked off, there could have been better communication on when the exact start date for the project would be. In the future, the project team should ensure that all team members understand exactly when work will start.
- This is the first time that NT has been fully embedded into the council, and they have found the partnership to be very beneficial. Both parties are aligned in

their ambition to do more meaningful community engagement work, and the project has benefited from NT's good public image. The team are looking to make the relationship with NT more permanent.

- Communication between teams within PCC has been challenging and is in need of streamlining. Improved internal communication pathways would ensure priorities are more strongly aligned.

Next steps

According to interview data, project team members were happy with how the first year of the Nature Returns programme went. At the time of writing (February 2025), the only habitat work left to complete before March is some hedge planting, which excluding the area now unavailable due to SuDS plans, is on track for completion.

Due to the promising results from the NFM work, they have decided to use NbS funding to extend the monitoring of the watercourses for an additional three years.

Community engagement and awareness raising activities will continue to play a central role in PNG's strategy, so that the public understand the benefit of the work they are doing.

Partnership Project Case Study: Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery

Lead organisation: Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust
This case study is based on interviews with four project team members, one interview with a neighbouring tenant farmer, interviews with three community members, two workshops with eight GWT volunteers and reports submitted by the project team to NE.

Overview

72.14 ha of priority habitats are being created across the Hasfield Court Estate, including 48.07 ha of wood and wood pasture, 6.8 ha of traditional orchards (including the construction of appropriate guards and fencing) and 18.21 ha of species-rich grassland. The vision for the project is to showcase how the restoration of a mosaic of habitats can deliver quantifiable Nature-based Solutions (NbS) for climate change within a mixed landscape, generate sustainable business and investment opportunities, and benefit local communities. The team are also working on the Eelscapes Landscape Recovery (LR) partnership project, the two projects are said to be complementary to one another. In addition, GWT land and the Hasfield Estate are under Environmental Stewardship agreements – a combination of entry level and higher tier.

The partnership project received £807,910.40 of funding through the Nature Returns programme with match funding from Gloucestershire County Council of £24,950 and from Severn Trent Water of £16,800.

Factors of success

- A positive and longstanding relationship with the landowners and similar interest in environmental issues.
- Taking the time to engage informally and build relationships with local communities, farmers, and volunteers.
- High levels of dedication and motivation from the project team, which drove them to reach their objectives despite early delays.
- Effective partnership project adviser support, which enabled the team to pose queries and receive answers.
- High levels of trust between team members made possible due to their knowledge, skills, and commitment. This manifested as the combination of support from management when needed and freedom to work flexibly and make decisions in the field.

Progress, outcomes and expected impacts

Habitat creation and restoration

Progress

The project team reported that they have delivered all the planned species-rich grassland and orchard creation and are set to complete the remaining work by the end of the funded period.

Table A6.5. Habitat creation and restoration.

Habitat type	Target (ha/m)	Amount completed as of End of Year Report (April 2025) (ha/m)
Wood and wood pasture	48.07	48.07
Traditional orchards	6.8	6.8
Species –rich grassland	16.67	18.21
Scrub	0.6	0.06
Total	72.14 ha	73.14 ha
Hedgerow	1,500 m	1700 m

In terms of monitoring, reporting indicates the team completed Nature Reserve Condition Monitoring across the project area – a standardised vegetation survey which will be repeated annually and inform how vegetation communities change over time. The landscape has been mapped through aerial drone flyover of the site pre-work. This is also planned for post habitat creation to see how the landscape has changed.

In the 2024/2025 programme year, monitoring has continued through several activities including wildlife ecological surveys, acoustic monitoring conducted by Hartpury University, invertebrate samples collected by an ecological consultant and examined in a workshop for GWT trainees, volunteers and staff. All habitat monitoring baseline work was completed by the GWT team, while Natural England conducted the carbon baselining.

Ambition to monitor is high, and steps have been taken to partner with Exeter University around the use of remote sensing for identifying indicators for ecosystem integrity, and Hartpury College. There are also ambitions to engage community members in monitoring activities. The project team discussed their limited ability to monitor to date due to time and resource pressures and, due to delays to and issues with delivery. It was said that getting a baseline had not been possible. There was also some uncertainty about how best to monitor, particularly with limited resources and time to do so. More detailed guidance from Natural England (within the short timescales of the programme) and from other partnership projects on best practice around monitoring was said by team members to have been a useful but missing element of the programme. Most recently, a meeting was set up with the Wild Exmoor partnership project to discuss shared learning around monitoring programmes.

Impacts

Landscape change is visible, and while it's too early to see most ecological impacts, differences in sward height within the newly planted scrub are producing a more mosaic landscape, unlike the previous sheep-grazed environment. In future, increases in the biodiversity value of the landscape, including soil health and abundance of native pollinator species, as well as increased carbon storage are expected by project team and community members alike. In approximately 15 years, the orchard is expected to produce a significant amount of fruit each year, the management and sale of is yet to be planned. The whole landscape is expected to transform to a heavily wooded and more open landscape (due to the removal of field enclosures) with a

complex mosaic of habitats. The primary direct beneficiary, as identified by community members, will be the landowner, in terms of economic security and a change to their business model more in line with their environmentally driven ethos. Therefore, GWT are aiming to use it as an exemplar site, demonstrating to nearby landowners what can be done for nature recovery on agricultural land.

There were questions from the project team and volunteers about the carbon/biodiversity costs of materials used in the project, namely timber used for fencing and guards, mulch and chemicals used to clear habitat prior to restoration/creation, and whether these costs negated the expected benefits. Several individuals mentioned interest in both accounting for these inputs in calculations of the benefits and finding alternative and lower carbon ways of achieving habitat creation. This motivated the commissioning of some carbon accountancy work detailed in the Blended Finance section.

Challenges

Challenges to habitat restoration and creation plans centred around:

Short timescales and programme delays

Delays in issuing project contracts have meant that delivery has had to occur over shorter timescales, increasing pressure on project staff. Delays are said to be particularly difficult since the project activities are highly seasonal. As an example, the first season's worth of planting started later than planned and was then impacted by dry weather, leading to additional effort to water the trees to help their survival. The weather was said by those involved in delivery to have been a battle throughout. Planting of the species-rich grassland in the first year did not occur at the right time of year either, due to delays, and poor weather conditions at the time, there were significant weed issues. The mistiming of funding was also said, by volunteers, to have resulted in the loss of 50 hectares of quality hay. Although they met the initial habitat creation goals, the project team said that the impact of shorter time scales and additional work linked to these delays (watering trees, weeding etc) meant monitoring through quality surveys could not be conducted over the 2023 spring/summer. The issues have meant that staff have devoted more time to the partnership project than planned, meaning that less non-partnership project related work has been carried out on the Trust's reserves than expected.

The team noted that it was difficult to build strong relationships within one-year projects, especially when stakeholders are initially reluctant such as the new tenant farmer they involved in the 2024/2025 programme year.

The unpredictability of the weather and the seasonality of work mean it can be difficult to know how many people to hire and there is a tendency to hire fewer staff leading to overworked and overwhelmed staff. Short timescales in applying and delivering the project also impacted the ability of the team to effectively (in their minds) plan and develop the project. The project team stated that they would have liked to have time to consult with local communities and farmers on the best area to conduct activities, taking into account valuable arable and productive farmland.

Weather conditions

Challenges caused by weather conditions continued throughout the project.

- Prepping of the species-rich grassland habitat creation work had to be redone by hand due to summer flooding and continued bad weather.
- Some orchard trees had to be replaced due to wet weather damage.

- Road flooding impaired community access to the site, limiting engagement at points.

Ambitious delivery plans
The time scale, thought to be one of the biggest challenges associated with the delivery of this project, was also impacted by the overly ambitious delivery plans of the project. The orchard planting was a new endeavour with relatively little information or guidance available on how best to do it. The construction of tree guards by the project team took longer than expected and affected the team's motivation given the repetitiveness of the work and the laborious nature of the task at odds with some of the team's expertise in conservation. One staff member, only assigned to work part time, worked more on the project than originally planned. That said, they are on track to meet their objectives and team members were said to have learnt a great deal about working across a larger landscape more efficiently.

Reduced/lack of resources
The funding received was reduced from the initial application, and the challenge associated with this was the loss of additional roles to support project management and delivery. The result, as stated by project members, was more work for the team and reduced ability to deliver on core areas of work elsewhere.

Staff changes close to the end of the project have added another stressor, as there has been no time to get new staff in.

Ambiguous programme requirements
The programme's expectations of partnership projects, in terms of community engagement, blended finance and monitoring, could have been clearer from the outset, although it was acknowledged that these have changed over the course of the programme. As a result, however, the project team have had to adapt their resourcing and put additional resource into aspects of the project that weren't anticipated when they initially applied (an increased focus on community and investor engagement). In addition, there was remaining uncertainty of the expectations for landscape maintenance, management and monitoring. Several respondents questioned what was going to be done with fruit from the orchard and how these trees would be maintained.

Solutions
Solutions to some of these challenges being implemented or pursued included:
- Using more contractors to counteract the changing staffing needs linked to the seasonality of the work – this is being pursued in the extended funding period.
- Having longer project development phases built into the delivery period.
- Providing clearer communication of programme requirements under each workstream and programme objective, including the resources, staff and expertise needed within project teams.
- Outsourcing monitoring to external consultants and/or partnering with research institutes.
- Providing greater guidance on monitoring and sharing of best practices between partnership projects.
- Seeking guidance from Natural England to overcome issues around timing of work, seasonality and weather conditions.

Blended finance

Conversations with the WS4 team were said to have helped the team's understanding of what might be possible in terms of private funding, exploring whether GWT is in the same position as others when it comes to thinking about blended finance, and thinking about what their product is and what they can sell. The benefits of these discussions were particularly around learning the language of green finance and feeling confident talking to investors or buyers, including what they are looking for and what evidence they need.

Partnership project forum meetings and events where there had been discussion of some of the opportunities around blended finance were said to have been useful. Two of the meetings, in particular, on the Woodland Carbon Code and blended finance models were particularly informative. This learning spurred the project to commission some carbon accounting and green finance market research, integrating carbon data collected by Natural England. The aim of the carbon accountancy work is to understand the carbon footprint associated with procurement and installation of the habitat creation works, alongside creating carbon storage forecasts for them. The green finance work is focused on market, competitor and trend analysis and engagement with stakeholders and target buyers as well as working towards product development.

GWT are also taking part in the Agroforestry Carbon Code run by the Forestry Commission, which is research aiming to gain more understanding of the carbon in the in-field tree planted across the wood pasture and orchards. In future, it aims to act as an add-on to the WCC, so this work will add to the evidence base supporting this proposal.
GWT have been selected as one of three partnership projects for mapping of their sites using the Land Use Choices Tool (LUCT), providing information on land management such as where best to site tree planting when considering the potential impact on woodland connectivity, water quality, water flows and land quality. The team reported this was a positive experience, citing the professionalism, communicability and knowledge of Environment Agency staff and the value of the tool, although there were concerns about national dataset granularity the process of integrating higher-resolution local data.

Effective dissemination

The project team discussed the prioritisation of habitat creation at the expense of comprehensive dissemination of the project's activities. There is appetite for doing more on collecting, collating, and sharing data and knowledge such as:

- Having partnership project forums on monitoring methods to align data collection and develop some consistent data sets.
- Creating a central repository for partnership project data.
- Developing links with a research body to help interpret and present data to showcase the benefits of NbS and help partnership projects to engage with investors.
- Utilising the Nature Returns brand to give the projects gravitas, particularly in blended finance markets, with support from programme partners.

However, quarterly reports have reported some dissemination work, including:

- Social media posts on subjects such as the Nature Returns project, National Apple Day, Swallows and House Martins.

- Their website has been updated to include information on the Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery project and on the parataxonomy workshop
- A magazine article titled "My Wild Gloucestershire - Hannah Bottrill"

There is little knowledge on the Nature Returns campaign as yet, but the project team have used the branding in project information boards at events. It was felt that there was considerable work to be done on monitoring, market research and evidence gathering before the brand could be used more significantly, but also that the Nature Returns campaign had the potential ability to pool resources for project partners.

Conversations with the partnership project adviser around developing the dissemination side through the Nature Returns campaign were reflected in the initial extension bid submission and proposed outcomes. There was particular interest in using the Nature Returns brand to help engage with and sell to investors, and over the last year they have been doing lots of work to create promotional material for the green finance aspect. The importance of Nature Returns being a government-backed initiative was said, by the project team, to be a valuable facet of the programme that would hopefully lead to greater investor confidence. Within Gloucestershire, the Gloucester Nature and Climate Fund was discussed as being set up by the local Nature Partnership as the main facilitator of Biodiversity Net Gain and potentially carbon credits.

Stakeholder engagement

Landowners

The relationship with the Hasfield Estate landowners was said by the project team, to have developed over many years prior to the project and in relation to work the Trust is doing on an adjacent nature reserve. The landowner, who, along with the land agent, is the main point of contact for the partnership project is said to be particularly interested in environmental issues, driving their enthusiasm for being involved. In addition, the landowners were said, by volunteers, to be hobby farmers and thus in a position to integrate nature recovery without worrying about loss of income. The Nature Returns funding, alongside several tenancy agreements coming to end and the land coming under estate control again provided the opportunity for GWT and the landowners to work together.

There was said to be regular communication with the landowner, land agent and other tenant farmers both informally and through meetings. The landowners comprise of three brothers all of whom are based outside the landscape, making both regular meetings and quick decision-making difficult, and the team commented that it has sometimes been difficult to communicate with them and fully understand what they want from the project. From the point of view of the volunteers and local residents, the estate owners were not seen to be particularly engaged or visible on site. The relationship with the land agent, who sits on the board for the Trust's Landscape Recovery project, was said, by the project team, to be positive.

As discussed by the project team, an issue of working with a landowner, in this case through a legal agreement, was the additional burden of having to advise landowners not just on the project but on stewardship and grazing agreements. This additional time spent on estate management was not anticipated but is essential due to being lead partner and liable for any non-compliance of a scheme (GWT could get fined if the landowner doesn't comply). To mitigate this to some extent the Trust has set up a

legal collaboration agreement, at the cost to them of £5,000. The time needed to do this has led to delays in making payments to the estate for land management, impacting their ability to procure contractors where funding is coming through the stewardship schemes. In addition, community members raised the concern that public money is being spent to improve private land, although it was acknowledged that engaging private landowners in NbS was important. There was also pressure from the tenant farmers whose tenancy agreements on parts of their land had come to an end. These tenant farmers raised concerns about planting of trees on what they considered to be prime agricultural land that they had previously farmed.

During the 2024/2025 programme year, GWT engaged with a tenant farmer for some of the habitat work. They were found to be less receptive to nature recovery, and required more persuasion, but the financial incentive and the ability of GWT to manage all the work eventually convinced them to participate.

There was an expectation across all interviewees that as the evidence base grows for the project the landowners will be able to use their networks to promote the work and show other landowners what can be achieved and how NbS can be used as an income stream.

The team are writing up management briefs for each of the fields in the project to inform the landowner of future management needs. They are actively encouraging the landowner to use regenerative farming methods.

Local stakeholders and communities

Ways in which the partnership project has engaged with local stakeholders include:

- Initial community consultation prior to work starting to discuss the work and hear opinions, which were said to be largely encouraging with only minor issues raised.
- Discussion of the project at local parish meetings and plans posted on the parish website.
- Members of the neighbouring village (Ashleworth) were invited to see the work being done by the partnership project, with the ambition of them replicating some of what is being done in a field in their parish. The neighbouring village also arranged for one of the project team to present the project at a Parish meeting.
- An ongoing volunteering group through GWT who are directly involved in project activities, largely made up of retired individuals.
- Tree planting days and a major donor's event with a guided walk on the estate.
- A walk and talk with 30 members of the Severn Vale Catchment Partnership, demonstrating how the Hasfield work fits within other NbS work in the area.
- A local agricultural college has been doing some work on the site.
- A talk at a wider GWT volunteer conference, attended by the CEO and Chair of Trustees, increasing internal awareness of the project.

The project team discussed their lack of work on engagement and communications due to higher than anticipated delivery demands and lack of dedicated engagement resources or staff. In interviews in January 2025, the team noted how the volume of communications and community engagement reduced further in the second programme year. They would like to produce a regular newsletter update and inform

the community about monitoring findings and are exploring opportunities to engage with schools.

Interactions with the local community in terms of explaining and showcasing the project were found to have helped its positive reception. That said, volunteers estimated that only half of the neighbouring village knew of the project and that the lack of knowledge was in part due to the project occurring on private land with little public access. Positive reception is thought to be linked to the land remaining in production rather than going solely to rewilding.

The project team stated that creating that community connection and level of trust was important from the beginning, aided by listening to people, understanding their concerns, and trying to address them where possible.

The team reported lots of interest from the local farming community, despite limited direct engagement, due to tenant farms and contractors conversing with the wider public about the work occurring in the project sites. They noted that awareness was mostly being raised about the project through word of mouth.

Community impacts

Positive benefits of the project as discussed with volunteers and community members were around:

- The expected overspill of wildlife benefits e.g., birds and butterflies, in areas adjacent to the project and the joy of wildlife such as field mice and owls being more visible.
- Volunteers, involved in multiple aspects of the project delivery, being a part of a project as opposed to being assigned to various activities across areas. This was said to increase pride in their work and motivation.
- Volunteers taking what they have learnt and applying it elsewhere e.g., dead hedging in their own garden.
- The potential to sell pasture-fed and locally processed meat from the land at a premium if tenancy agreements allow it (at present they do not), was said to be a potential benefit in the future.
- The long-term carbon and biodiversity benefits for future generations.

Concerns about the project raised by the community included:

- Limited public access and public right of way was said, by community members, to be preventing people from benefitting from the landscape and reducing opportunities for education.
- The removal of high-grade arable land, with its own ecology and species composition, from production, rather than locating the project on marginal land, was a particular concern for former and nearby farmers, in light of national food security and self-sufficiency goals. One community member stated.

*"*It's really hard, as a farmer, to see great high grade arable land be taken out of UK food production. I don't think that's a good thing. I get it on marginal land, but they are high grade fields*."* – Community member

- The change to the landscape, particularly Barrow Hill was one area of contention. Different memories of the Hill and its uses/aesthetic by different community members led to varied opinions on its use in the project (for example

some did not want the line of the hill to be marred by trees while others remembered a time when elm trees were grown on the Hill).

Differences in opinions, for example whether they seemed to value food production or wildlife conservation more strongly, appeared linked to people's backgrounds. Those with farming backgrounds seemed to have more concerns about food production, for example.

Programme collaboration

Relationships with programme partners were said to be positive, as was the site visit from the programme team. The partnership project adviser was said to be supportive and quick to react, although perhaps overwhelmed by the workload. There was good communication with the Natural England programme team and a flexible approach to problem solving. Interviewees in the first programme year indicated that sharing between partnership projects was said to have been largely absent from the programme. Although partnership project forums were useful to get a wider understanding of the programme and start to build relationships across partnership projects, they did not include a mechanism for sharing information. The team wanted to know more about how other partnership projects have approached engagement and monitoring. At a minimum they felt a directory of who is working on what within the programme and partnership projects would be useful, so as to further build those connections and seek advice.

The project team noted that programme partners appear to have faced challenges in recruiting roles to support the partnership projects on delivery, in particular the loss of a partnership project adviser and the only recent appointment of someone in the Forestry Commission who can provide local support, which at this late stage was not seen to be particularly useful. There was a strong feeling that the programme, rather than being purely a mechanism for delivering funding, could be much more collaborative and make connections between people working on different aspects in different organisations, to enhance the work of the partnership projects. It was acknowledged, however, that this would have been difficult when partnership projects were in the midst of delivery early on. One project team member said:
*"*Everyone is enthusiastic but there's not the resources to do everything everyone wants. As a partnership project it's about trialling new ideas and new ways of working and I think that's got the creative juices flowing a little bit*"* (partnership project interview).

Lessons learned

The project team were surprised that the community reception was so positive, and that the habitat creation work would take so long. Were other projects to be funded the learning that would need to be taken into account includes:

For programme partners and funders

- Giving greater flexibility in funding to allow for resources to be reallocated when additional priorities are identified and to help ensure delivery activities occur in the right season. Making sure the timing of contracts considers the nature and timing of the work being proposed (including for surveying).
- Providing extra resources to do communications, engagement and monitoring.
- Providing more guidance on how partnership projects should all be monitoring across very different landscapes.

- Allowing for a partnership project development phase in order to give enough time to fully develop a project, including community consultation, and avoid as many unanticipated challenges as possible, this includes the funder providing fully developed objectives and expected outputs at the outset. Given time constraints this may comprise being clearer on expectations and giving applicants a longer lead time to understand the guidance and write a proposal or providing funding to plan projects so they are ready ahead of funding opportunities.
- Involving long-term staff in the site management rather than introducing temporary employees maintains local knowledge of the sites passed the programme conclusion, enabling future site monitoring to be integrated into day-to-day work.

For the project team

- Build in contractor/consultant costs into proposals to allow work to be delivered more flexibly.
- Be more realistic/pragmatic about what the team can achieve in the timescales in terms of delivery and broader project management.
- More work must be done to assess how one year projects can be undertaken in the face of worsening weather conditions due to climate change, especially on floodplains. For example, it may be necessary to segment work into a first stage of enabling work, followed by the actual work at a later date.
- Seek expertise at the planning stage on new habitat creation activities proposed.
- Explore, with the funder, the best balance between habitat creation, monitoring and communications.

Much of this learning stems from the project team being eager to have the resources to achieve their ambitious landscape-scale goals and take advantage of the funding opportunity and chance to showcase the effectiveness of NbS approaches. There was acknowledgment that given all the ideas the team had for the project; it might be pragmatic to take a staged approach to the programme.

Next steps

At the time of writing the project team are continuing to deliver the habitat work including hedgerow planting, tree planting, scrub planting and fence installation. The team have planned a tree planting exercise day in March and have invited several other organisations in the hope of facilitating knowledge exchange and ideas sharing. 80-100 people are expected to attend. They also have a scrub planting day planned, which 60+ people are expected to attend.

Partnership Project Case Study: Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change

Lead organisation: Groundwork NE & Cumbria
This case study is based on interviews with two partnership project team members and four landowners who are directly involved in the partnership project, a workshop with eight members of the local community and reports submitted by the project team to NE.

Overview

103.97ha of priority habitat has been created and restored across four estates in Northumberland. Habitat created and restored includes floodplain mosaic, grassland, peatland restoration, woodland, lowland heath and hedgerows. The project was led by Groundwork NE & Cumbria who acted as a third-party intermediary between the land managers (in this case study this term is used to include both landowners and farming tenants involved in the project) and the Nature Returns programme team by providing project design and management expertise. The vision was to create an exemplar partnership project for nature recovery around the river Wansbeck which restored mixed habitats, showcased how different land managers can come together to fight climate change, reduced greenhouse gas emissions and promoted carbon sequestration, whilst providing many benefits for nature and society. This partnership project contributed to the wider Wansbeck Catchment Vision by building on previous habitat improvements, for example through a Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF) grant and a Water Environment Improvement Fund grant.

The partnership project received £929,737.88 of funding through the Nature Returns programme with match funding coming from the Great Northumberland Forest fund and an England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO) grant as well as additional funding from the Ray Wind Fund.

Factors of success

- A highly skilled team with experience working together to deliver similar projects.
- Strong trust in the project manager and clear roles for all team members.
- A clear point of decision making ensuring the vision is delivered. An engagement officer who is very well connected to local experts across a broad range of disciplines allowing the team to quickly find and utilise the best local expertise as and when needed.
- Shared interest in restoration of the environment and biodiversity between the project team and participating land managers.
- Persistence, a focus on solutions and always looking for further opportunities.

Progress, outcomes and expected impacts

Habitat creation and restoration

Progress

Interview data and monthly reports show that at the time of writing (February 2025), the habitat creation and restoration work is on track for completion by March 2025, excluding some tree planting on the Middleton North estate which has been omitted due to complications with the Countryside Stewardship (CS) agreement for the land manager. The partnership project will deliver the following habitat creation and restoration:

Table A6.6. Habitat creation and restoration.

Habitat type	Target (Ha/m)	Amount completed as of End of Year Report (April 2025) (Ha/m)
Broadleaf woodland	1.62	0
Floodplain mosaic habitat	38.47	26.33
Floodplain	6.5	6.5
Mixed native woodland	1.31	1.1
Wood pasture	2.8	0
Peaty pockets	74	55
Species-rich grassland	48	17
Semi-natural grassland	34	0
Riparian woodland	0.6	0.6
Blanket bog	8	8
Peatland restoration with conifer plantation	7.2	7.2
Lowland wet heath	98	98
Total	320.5 ha	219.73 ha
Watercourse	3,878 m	2,489 m
Hedgerow	10,894 m	10,895 m

The project is expected to fully complete the work before the end of the contracted period in March 2025. Work completed includes:

- Scrapes and fencing at Dean House farm creating 2.7 ha of floodplain habitat.
- Grip blocking, birch thinning and planting of wildflower meadows at Gallows Hill.
- Fencing at Middleton North.
- Peatland restoration at Harwood Forest.
- Installation of stone crossings, drinking bays, hedge planting and fencing at Fairnley Farm, resulting in approximately 4.6 ha of floodplain being enclosed and enhanced.
- Installation of fencing for hedgerows at Greenleighton and Dyke Head.
- Hedgerow planting at the Ralph Shield site.
- Grip blocking, leaky dams, wader scrapes and floodplain reconnection at Rothley West Shield.

During the early stages of the contract a peatland restoration activity at Harwood Forest was added. This was partly funded by underspend on contractors for other activities and additional funding streams. This site was considered during the initial application process but was not included due to the short timescales of the application window and new staff at the Harwood Forest site. A baseline assessment of the site was completed in line with the other sites in the project. To ensure effective long-term maintenance of the peatland sites, members of the project's Steering Group visited a local Northumbrian farm where they could see first-hand how peatland sites are managed alongside agriculture.
The evaluation monitoring survey results indicated that the project team conducted (and contracted) the following annual monitoring:

- Vegetation surveys including species counts and sward height measurements,
- Soil coring for soil organic carbon assessments,
- Bird surveys,
- Gas flux through the carbon and soil assessments,
- Fixed point photography.

Additionally, two more monitoring activities commenced in the 2024/2025 programme year:

- The Forestry Commission and Forest Research investigated the response of Oak trees to environmental change through the use of dendrometers installed and monitored by Groundwork NE & Cumbria among other partners.
- Two time-lapse cameras were set-up within the Harwood Burn site to monitor water levels and enable analysis of the effect of the leaky dams installed there.

The project team and the land managers emphasised in interviews their enthusiasm around the opportunity to conduct such in-depth monitoring. They felt that it would help to encourage support for the project and future work:
"having that visual impact on the ground and then also having an expert coming around [to conduct a bird survey] and saying this is now attracting X, Y and Z. All those little stories help build trust in the project" (partnership project interview).

For some land managers, monitoring activities motivated their participation as they were keen to build a picture of how the ecological systems were working on their land. The monitoring data generated is likely to then influence future works and opportunities within agri-environment schemes (AES). However, a concern was raised by a land manager that carbon monitoring could be more comprehensive to cover hedgerow planting and changes to management of grassland habitats to ensure a full range of impacts are captured.

By 2024, the WRCC field team had been trained in the use of gas flux equipment, enabling them to conduct their own monitoring on the new sites and several of the previous year's sites.

Groundwork NE & Cumbria have involved a number of partners during the design and progress of the works. For example, the Woodland Trust helped to create woodland plans and Northumbria University assisted with developing the monitoring assessments for the partnership project. In addition to input from expert organisations there has also been a focus on using local experts and local contractors. For example, bird surveys were completed by a local ornithologist and local contractors carried out fencing, hedge laying, tree planting and earth works. Where different experts have been involved, they have been invited to the project's steering group meetings to give updates to the project team and land managers.

Impacts

Whilst most impacts of the work will take effect in the longer term, there have already been some early indications of impacts from the work completed:

- The fenced areas at Fairnley Farm and Middleton North are protecting the land from livestock poaching. Where this fencing is along the Wansbeck River watercourse it will already be preventing soil erosion caused by trampling by livestock. It is expected that this protection will allow these areas to become more species-rich over time.
- Continuation of the bird surveys has confirmed that reprofiling of watercourses, alongside creation of pools and wider channels promptly attracts bird life. Particularly, wetland bird abundance has increased.
- Stoning-up of crossing points have improved land manager access to their land.
- The scrapes created on the Little Harle estate in October 2023 were tested during heavy rain and flood events in December 2023. One land manager commented:

*"*when you can see the physical interventions and you can see with your own eyes that it's doing what it should be doing, as in it's holding water, and we've obviously had a bit of that [heavy rain] in the last 6 to 8 weeks. It's been a very good demonstration*."* - Land manager interviewee

Longer term it is anticipated that:

- The scrapes will continue to slow the flow of the river, hold back flood water when required and create habitat for biodiversity, particularly insects and birdlife.
- The peatland restoration will slow the flow of water over the upper catchment areas, hopefully reducing the peak water flow during flood events.
- The tree and hedge planting will provide shelter for livestock, shaded areas along the river and wildlife corridors.
- Hedge planting will provide shelter and improve connectivity for wildlife, linking Gallows Hill with the adjacent woodland.
- The planting of young willows in the lower part of the paleo channels dug previously will create a more diverse floodplain habitat whilst slowing the flow of the watercourse.

Challenges

Challenges to habitat restoration and creation plans centred around:

Supply of local contractors

A key issue noted by the majority of interviewees was the supply and availability of local contractors for fencing, hedge laying and tree planting. The contractors in the area are skilled and competent but there is a surplus of work. It was suggested by one land manager in the interview that there was an opportunity in the local area to set up apprenticeships to ensure capacity to deliver these projects in the future. If more contractors were available this could reduce timeline risks for the project as they could hire multiple contractors to work simultaneously across the sites rather than one contractor to do all of the sites.

Impacts of the weather

Flooding in December 2023 washed away the new fencing that had been put in at Dean House Farm. This has now been rectified but could become an issue longer term as this piece of land is tenanted. The landowner is very conscious to ensure that the fence is fit for purpose and does not become a burden for the tenant. If the new

fencing becomes a long-term issue or cost to the tenant farmer, then there is a risk that it will not be sufficiently maintained.

Rising fencing and tree planting costs
Increasing costs of materials for fencing and tree planting has required the team to reallocate budgets where necessary or even scale back the project scope in some cases.

Short timelines for delivery
Due to delays receiving the grant funding in 2022 the timeline for delivery had to be reassessed in line with specific planting seasons for trees and favourable weather for completing earthwork operations. The following challenges arose due to the short timelines for delivery:

- Vegetation surveys had to take place during late September in the first programme year, which was a sub-optimal period for recording plant species. This was due to the lead-in time taken for establishing / learning the monitoring techniques, obtaining equipment and the availability of the specialist botanical consultants. However now that systems have been set up future monitoring is expected to be timelier.
- The claims process and reporting requirements from Natural England were very time consuming. This was particularly an issue when the reporting form changed but this issue has been resolved now that the form is more familiar.
- Tree planting was delayed due to waiting for a EWCO grant funding agreement which was a frustration as there were limited tree planting seasons within the contract delivery period.

Blended finance

The project team have progressed the blended finance aspect of their partnership project, having completed several activities:

- In interviews, the project team stated that they had commissioned consultants from AtkinsRealis to develop a sustainable finance model. The work involved identifying key investible metrics, reviewing monitoring procedures, reviewing aggregation models applicable to landowners/managers in the catchment, producing case studies to demonstrate the benefits of related practices, understand sellers' preferred options for investment models and market testing.
- They have engaged with various companies interested in BNG, carbon offsetting and/or water quality improvements facilitated by WRCC, including Northumbrian Water, Lynemouth Power Limited and Tenth Revolution. Additionally, they have been engaging in conversation with organisations such as Northumberland County Council, the Environment Agency and Ray Wind Farm to catalyse interest in blended finance/funding opportunities.
- There were efforts to increase the team's knowledge through attendance at sustainable finance workshops and conferences such as the Nature Finance UK Conference. As well as engagement with Natural England's Catchment Sensitive Farming Adviser. (July to September 2023 quarterly report)
- The project team have liaised with Northumberland County Council Regeneration team around Local Investment in Natural Capital (LINC) and synergies with the Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change project. (July to September 2023 quarterly report)

- The RSPB were invited to present at the project Steering group meeting to give an update on the Haweswater Landscape Recovery development work. (July to September 2023 quarterly report)
- One of the participating landowners applied for woodland code registration to begin the process of looking at woodland carbon credits. (November 2023 monthly report)
- The project team participated in a sprint session in early 2024 led by the Environment Agency. The workshop focused on the potential to deliver a catchment-wide programme of nature recovery for the Wansbeck and posed the possibility of producing a strategic plan for the area including identification of natural capital so that investible metrics could be marketed to potential investors. The meeting was attended by AtkinsRealis, enabling them to discuss green finance opportunities with partners and landowners in the project area. The project team are determined to keep up the momentum that they have built through local improvement projects.

The land managers are also keen to understand what opportunities may be available for their farms, particularly around carbon accounting. There is a real interest from the land managers in this project to explore further alternative financing options, motivated by the uncertainty created by changing government subsidies and AES options. The project team identified that much of their habitat work on private land is aiming to support those land managers in entering the new higher tier scheme in Countryside Stewardship once this becomes available.

Reporting suggests that the project team have identified local networks, such as the Northumbrian farming network, as being important groups for the Environment Agency to engage with to take forward their blended finance work with land managers. The Northumbrian farming network is one of many organisations in the area already starting work on blended finance opportunities. The project team see this as being key for the continuation and promotion of Nature-based Solutions (NbS) projects.

Blended funding work was much more limited in the second year of Nature Returns, and they have used the budget to commission a natural capital report from Eunomia on the new habitat creation/restoration sites. Their green finance strategy work is now being taken forward in the Wansbeck Investment Strategy, a project led by Groundwork and funded through LINC. This will involve the identification of potential investors and buyers, and should be completed by the end of March 2025.

Dissemination of learning from the partnership project

The project team have made considerable effort to disseminate information about the project activities within their local community. This included efforts to strengthen and make new contacts with members of the farming community who may be interested in future NbS projects. They have also given talks at three local parish council meetings to spread awareness of the project, its activities and its wider landscape aims. Other dissemination included:

- A feature on the local news television programme BBC Look North in May 2023. The press viewing figures from BBC Look North for this feature were 110,999.
- A feature in the Otterburn and 3 Kirks Newsletter about the sphagnum moss event.
- A social media post to explain the use of dendrometers to monitor tree responses to micro climatic events.

- Bespoke farm reports are being prepared for each farmer, showcasing monitoring data and preliminary results on the project progress in their land.
- The team invited a writing group to an archaeological walk and a WRCC presentation to inspire poems and stories written by the group. These will feature in an exhibition which will tour during spring 2025, with the hopes of raising awareness of the project.
- The team produced project case study booklets which have been used widely in Natural England conferences and business development team client meetings.

There have been some frustrations for the project team around the process of releasing project updates to the public. The project team emphasised the importance of proportionality when Natural England are checking communications outputs and feel that there could be different processes for locally and nationally targeted communications. Many of the partnership project outputs were for a very small local audience and often made through social media. The team feel that these sorts of communications should have a simple sign-off process to ensure timeliness of the communication. They have found that the full sign-off process through Natural England can take weeks which can reduce the impact of communication as the update is then out of date. For future communications, the project team have a better understanding of the timelines for sign-off on communications, meaning that they can more effectively plan the timing and production of dissemination products.

In terms of the programme's Nature Returns communication campaign, some concerns have been raised to the project team by local land managers around the name 'Nature Returns'. Individuals have expressed dissatisfaction with the implied meaning behind the name and feel that their efforts as farmers working to protect nature (which are often generational) are not being valued. It was suggested that these farmers feel that the name suggests that nature is not already there and feel affronted. The project team described that the possible link that the name makes between the finance side and the nature side of the project is too subtle and not recognised by those outside of the programme. The local dissatisfaction extends to other terms such as 'nature recovery' and 'rewilding' suggesting that there is sensitivity around these sorts of topics, often viewed as anti-farming. For these reasons, the partnership project has chosen to make limited use of the Nature Returns communication campaign branding. Additionally, the project team felt that the visual produced to represent their partnership project was not as strong as others and would have appreciated more opportunities to feedback on this, as the feedback meeting was held during a busy period for the project. The team were unsure whether involvement with the wider communications campaign would have a significant reach.

Stakeholder engagement

Land managers

This partnership project builds on relationships formed in previous projects through Green Recovery Challenge Fund funding, particularly between the National Trust (NT) and Groundwork NE & Cumbria. This pre-existing relationship enabled discussions with a number of NT's tenant farmers as well as other local farmers. Initial conversations involved five NT tenants and resulted in agreement from three to be involved in the first year of the partnership project and interest from one other for involvement in future projects. The tight timelines of the application process meant that there was limited time for sharing understanding, discussing options and providing reassurance. This has meant that those involved are already more environmentally

minded in their farming operations. In interview, the team from WRCC expressed how the NT have been key in “priming” their tenant farmers to be involved in the project.

In addition to those with pre-existing relationships, there was also a new NT tenant farmer involved at the Gallows Hill site. This tenant signed the tenancy contract in full knowledge of the planned work taking place and therefore was in favour of the work. The point was made by multiple interviewees that although the NT has the power to force this kind of work on its tenants this would not be sustainable in the long term and that the landowner-tenant relationship is one that should be carefully considered when negotiating these types of projects. It was felt by the majority of interviewees that this was handled well in this project.

Land managers illustrated a range of motivations for participating in the project. These motivations included:

- This project being an opportune way to achieve landscape change that they were planning to do anyway.
- Identifying the benefits of being involved in a project wider than their own land which also included significant monitoring efforts and peer-to-peer learning opportunities.
- The opportunity to be a pioneer and showcase a way forward under the changing farm subsidy system.
- Proposed works being a good fit with their AES or other environmental work.
- The opportunity for WRCC to assist with higher-tier CS applications.

The NT also shared in their interview that they felt it was positive for the organisation to be involved in partnerships outside of its boundaries as this allowed for skills and knowledge sharing as well as greater environmental improvements in the local area. Land managers described in interviews how they worked together with Groundwork NE & Cumbria to develop the plans for their land. One land manager described how they had a ‘wish list’ for the farm which included actions for enhancing nature and that they were able to fulfil some of these wishes on this project. They also stated that some of the tree planting work taking place would mean that they would be able to claim less on their Higher-Level Stewardship agreement but that the benefits of the planting, under the Nature Returns programme, for the specific landscape made this decision justifiable. Despite this case, overall, the project team reported in interviews that there will be many benefits for land managers’ AES applications. The partnership project contracted a farm adviser to ensure oversight on the impact of the project on AES agreements for the land managers.

Interview data shows that there was mixed knowledge of the NbS concept amongst land managers involved in the partnership project. Two out of three land managers reported in interviews that participation in the partnership project had improved their understanding of NbS. One land manager specifically commented that the focus on NbS from government bodies and other funders has caused them to look at their land in different ways and to identify areas which may be better suited to nature restoration than farming.

All three of the land managers expressed in interviews that the management and communication from Groundwork NE & Cumbria had been positive and clear. They have found the third-party governance model to be effective, as it has enabled land manager participation but with overarching management which looked at the activities on a catchment scale. There were regular meetings with all involved parties, such as the steering group meetings, meaning that it was easy for everyone to stay up to date

and have a full understanding of what was being delivered across the project. In December 2024, WRCC organised a knowledge exchange site visit involving 3 farmers, 2 Natural England officers and 1 NT manager, allowing them to convene knowledge, perceptions and concerns.

The project team have expressed aspirations to encourage participation from others in the farming community in future projects and have taken steps to pursue this through engaging the Cambo Young Farmers group (May 2023 Monthly Report) as well as presentations at community meetings attended by landowners (Quarterly Report September 2023). It was felt that the WRCC project will provide an example to showcase what can be achieved through these types of landscape changes.

Local community

Significant effort has been put into engaging with the local community by the project's farm and landowner engagement officer and other team members. The project team had not previously run community engagement in this area. A sample of this engagement includes:

- Photography walks led by a professional photographer across the estates involved in the project. These were attended by 18 individuals. Culminating in a semi-permanent photography exhibition hosted at Kirkharle Courtyard on the Little Harle estate. The launch event for the exhibition at the Wallington NT visitor centre was attended by 30 people with a further 1,200 visitors to the exhibition in the first month before the exhibition was then moved to the Little Harle estate.
- Attended Bellingham Show with a poster display. 15 stakeholders actively engaged, and the project team made contacts with the public, the Lune Rivers Trust and University of York.
- Ran an arts and crafts event for children at the NT Wallington Green Week and had a Project Exhibition there too.
- Newcastle University talk given to 2nd year Geography students. This was attended by 80 students.
- Archaeology walks to help participants interpret the landscape.
- Attendance at agricultural shows and a Heritage Open Day.

Offers for talks about the partnership project or land walks have been given to other local groups and as such there are further opportunities for engagement as the project continues.

The project team emphasised that the geographic location of the project is one that is rural and sparsely populated, making it difficult to recruit new volunteers and leading to reliance on NT volunteers. As a result, the quality of engagement with the community is more important to them than the number of people at each event. The team highlighted that the close-knit nature of the community means that even if they only had five people attend an event the message may actually get out to many more people through word of mouth as the local population have a high interest in their local area, particularly around flood risk management.

A workshop was conducted by the evaluation team with seven members of the community who participated in the photography walks. This workshop aimed to understand community members' experiences of the walks, what impact they felt the walks had on them and what impacts they felt the WRCC project could have in their local area. All workshop participants found the walks informative and interesting with

many commenting that they visited parts of their local area that they had not been to before despite living in the area for a very long time. They enjoyed having wildlife, geographic features and landscape changes pointed out and explained with a particular example given of the peatland restoration. There were feelings of pride around the photography exhibition with many encouraging family and friends to visit it.

It was commented by the walk leader that the experience of the walks was made richer by the participants themselves as they each brought their own knowledge of local history with some having familial ties to the land. This added depth and validation to the experience.

It was felt by some workshop attendees that they would have liked to encourage participation from a more diverse group with the walks so as to get a diversity of perspectives and potentially greater support for NbS projects from across society. The walk leader commented that they already knew everyone who participated in the walks so they had not been able to encourage participation from anyone new. Barriers to wider engagement discussed included the need to be able and confident to drive to rural locations as well as time availability. The project team did try to arrange walks at different times and on different days to accommodate those with time restraints.

Impacts

In terms of the impacts of the walk on participants, they commented that it had allowed them to meet new people, to connect with their local community and local area, and it had inspired them with their own land management projects at home. The project team emphasised the enthusiasm and personality of the walk leader as being a key factor in the success of the walks and photography exhibition.

In terms of impacts of the project on the local area, participants felt that it would be beneficial for biodiversity and flood risk management. Participants were encouraged to see and understand more about the NbS work taking place. This was particularly the case for the flood risk management work as the local area had been badly affected by flooding in the past. All participants found it reassuring and inspiring to see practical change for climate benefits in action. They found it comforting that change was taking place and being funded by the UK government as they described hearing a lot about climate change and its negative impacts but not a lot about tangible action being taken to tackle the issues. The participants were surprised by how quickly the landscape changes could take effect and start having positive impacts on biodiversity. However, participants found it difficult to differentiate this project from other local nature projects and suggested that clearer messaging would help to encourage engagement from others and demonstrate the benefits of this particular project.

Within the Ray Wind fund committee, it was highly contested as to whether to grant the funding for the peatland restoration as some members remembered the land being drained and the forest being planted. They were very keen that the new peat restoration work would not be reversed in years to come. The project team had to send a lot of additional information to reassure them. The project team found that the committee were particularly reassured by the knowledge that the project team had nearly 1000 years left on the lease of the land.

Programme collaboration

The project team expressed in interviews that Natural England have improved their approach to communication with the partnership projects to make it more collaborative, flexible and inclusive as the partnership project progressed. A number of the project team members work part time and appreciated the move to using polls to select dates and times for meetings. This flexibility and collaborative approach would be encouraged for future meetings and visits.

In early 2024, the project team stated in interviews that they would have liked more clarity from the programme team earlier in the contract regarding the other partnership projects and the activities within the programme workstreams. The project team feel that it would have been motivating to hear about all of the other work being done and the potential impacts for policy. A clear view of the 'bigger picture' would have helped the project team to add further clarity to their communications with stakeholders and discussions with partners. By early 2025, they confirmed that they have been exchanging knowledge with the other partnership projects, gaining understanding of planning permissions and approaches to various interventions. They found the in-person meetings have been very helpful for strengthening relationships.

In terms of the programme as a whole the project team feel that it has provided a great opportunity to showcase good practical examples of NbS within local contexts. The project team appreciated the partnership project format and felt that it was a good way to gather the evidence required to promote the NbS approach further. They understood that the partnership project and research format meant that Natural England may change and improve elements of the process as they go along. However, this has posed challenges for the partnership projects.

One key reflection from the project team was that if they were to start this process again, they would put more resource and planning into the monitoring side of the partnership project. The project team feel that although it is beneficial that this programme gave a very open and flexible brief for the partnership projects they would have liked more guidance on monitoring. It became clear that to successfully build a robust sustainable finance model the team would need to complete UK Habitat mapping and BNG condition assessments. There would also be benefits in terms of having monitoring measures that match with historical farm monitoring such as further vegetation monitoring so that change over a longer period of time could be assessed. Additionally, further guidance could have helped to ensure more consistency across the partnership project. This consistency of monitoring strategies would have allowed for comparison and a clearer overall picture of impact.

Lessons learned

The project team have been very pleased with the opportunity that the programme has offered for building on previous work done in the Wansbeck catchment. The partnership project has also offered a chance to build on existing, and create new, local partnerships which in turn increases the potential impact. Were other projects to be funded the learning that would need to be taken into account includes:

For programme partners and funder

- Including more thorough costing forms in the applications to ensure the applicants can sufficiently and transparently lay out the costs. Specifically including space to cost in landscape architect expertise to create detailed designs, prepare specifications, ensure the plans successfully go through the

planning process, procure consultants and contractors and run a tendering process. This is an additional specialist role that is separate from the project manager role of coordinating works and liaising with partners.
- Short application windows have a significant impact on what can be included within an application, particularly where private landowners are involved. The time needed for thorough consideration and negotiations should not be underestimated. This should be considered when aiming to attract a diverse range of applicants.
- Additional guidance on monitoring to ensure a level of consistency across the partnership projects and sufficient set up for blended finance monitoring requirements.
- Faster mobilisation of key aspects of the programme such as the baseline monitoring and the Nature Returns communication strategy to reduce delays to partnership project delivery.

For the project team

- The value of continuing to engage with partners and land managers should be recognised even when they have said no to participating in the partnership project. There are often opportunities to engage later in the project or in the future and continued engagement helps to encourage this through examples of the work. Many land managers need time to fully consider the opportunity and are often more keen once funding is secured.
- More consideration would be given to the monitoring strategy with less reliance on Natural England to cover aspects of monitoring.
- The governance model of having a third party designing and managing the project in collaboration with land managers has been successful and allows for more private land to be included in these types of projects in comparison to partnership projects run by organisations which own their own land.

Next steps

At the time of writing, the WRCC partnership project have several works to complete before this programme phase concludes, including hedge planting which was delayed due to heavy frost, some more grip blocking, channel modification, leaky dam installation and floodplain mosaic creation. There is also some soil coring still to do. However, it is expected that this will all take place prior to the end of the contract in March 2025. Additionally, the team have a volunteer tree planting day scheduled in February.

Longer-term the project team hope to increase the habitat creation and restoration work, collaborating with the NT and its tenant farmers to deliver on the vision for the Wansbeck catchment.

Annex 7: Research brief on best practice in dissemination of research findings

Objective and method:

As the Nature Returns programme progresses through its final year of funding each workstream is consolidating its conclusions and lessons learnt. To generate impact and spread the new knowledge acquired the programme team are setting out to disseminate findings to a variety of audiences. There are a number of individual subject areas for knowledge to be shared about as well as overarching messages from the programme as a whole. To maximise the impact of the programme and ensure that the knowledge and evidence generated is fully utilised by others the programme are planning a communication and dissemination campaign.

To support this effort, ICF have conducted desk research on best practices for dissemination and science communication. The research took a realist approach looking at the different audiences for dissemination and how the approach may need to differ to effectively communicate with each group. The objective of the research was to generate a set of best practice principles which will help the programme partners to further understand the factors which make communication of science and knowledge to policy makers (and other stakeholders) effective and then for the evaluation to use these factors as a way to measure progress in the absence of long-term behavioural evidence.

The main research question was: What steps need to be taken to ensure communication of science and knowledge leads to increased understanding, interest and behaviour change in policymakers (or other stakeholders)?

Key search terms were used to find literature via google scholar for academic literature and google for grey literature such as blog posts from academic or other relevant institutions. The literature was read in full and relevant excerpts extracted into an excel sheet where common themes were sought to create the principles.

Findings:

Principles:

Testing of the principles

Principles	Related questions	Data sources
1. Having a clear ***dissemination plan*** that includes: your objectives (what you want people to know and do something about), your	To what extent has a plan been developed? Does the plan include short-term and long-term dissemination?	Document review Workshop

Principles	Related questions	Data sources
audiences, the timeline, resource availability and your strategy.	How has the dissemination plan been used by different parts of the programme?	
2. ***Identifying audiences:*** Identifying and understanding your different audiences and their needs/interests. This sets the layout, tone and content for the communication piece. Also understanding the social context or current commonly held views to help with setting the tone and focus of the message to increase engagement, e.g. Will the findings challenge your audience on their world view or currently held knowledge of a subject?	To what extent have audiences been identified? How? Are there audiences identified for each of the workstreams? To what extent and how are different audiences being tailored to? Are there any commonly held views that will be challenged? How was this dealt with?	Document review Programme partner interviews
3. ***Formats***: Utilise different formats for communication to reach a wide audience/ continue conversation: social media, scientific articles, events and conferences, webinars, blog posts/guest articles, policy briefs, internal comms and informal discussions.	How many different formats are used for communication? For whom are these formats chosen? Are their multiple formats per audience? Which formats appear to be most effective? Why? (if data available on views etc)	Document review Programme partner interviews
4. ***Summarise:*** Create summaries of your key messages/ key evidence which demonstrates why each audience should care about the research/ message.	To what extent are summaries created around each key subject? Where are these summaries used? For which workstreams/ topics are there audience specific summaries created?	Document review Programme partner interviews
5. ***Link back to the overarching issue:*** Lead with the big picture. This could be the policy area or the key concepts of climate change, net zero, nature restoration etc. To capture the interest of the audience and convey the importance. Linking to a larger issue can also be	To what extent are dissemination outputs linked with bigger picture topics such as net zero? In what ways are individual topic areas introduced by discussing the wider context within which they sit and/or	Document review Programme partner interviews

Principles	Related questions	Data sources
useful in creating interest across departments where issues and solutions overlap- e.g. on the issue of net zero for environment and energy.	the wider problem they contribute to addressing?	
6. ***Address uncertainty:*** Discuss uncertainty where appropriate and in a way that works for the audience.	To what extent and how is uncertainty being communicated? Does this differ by audience? Why?	Document review Programme partner interviews
7. Think strategically about who can help you, who are ***influencers***, are there key people in your department who can help amplify a message or help effectively get the message to the policy audience and add further credibility.	In what ways have key people within key department (or outside) been identified who can amplify messages?	Programme partner interviews Workshop

The Theory

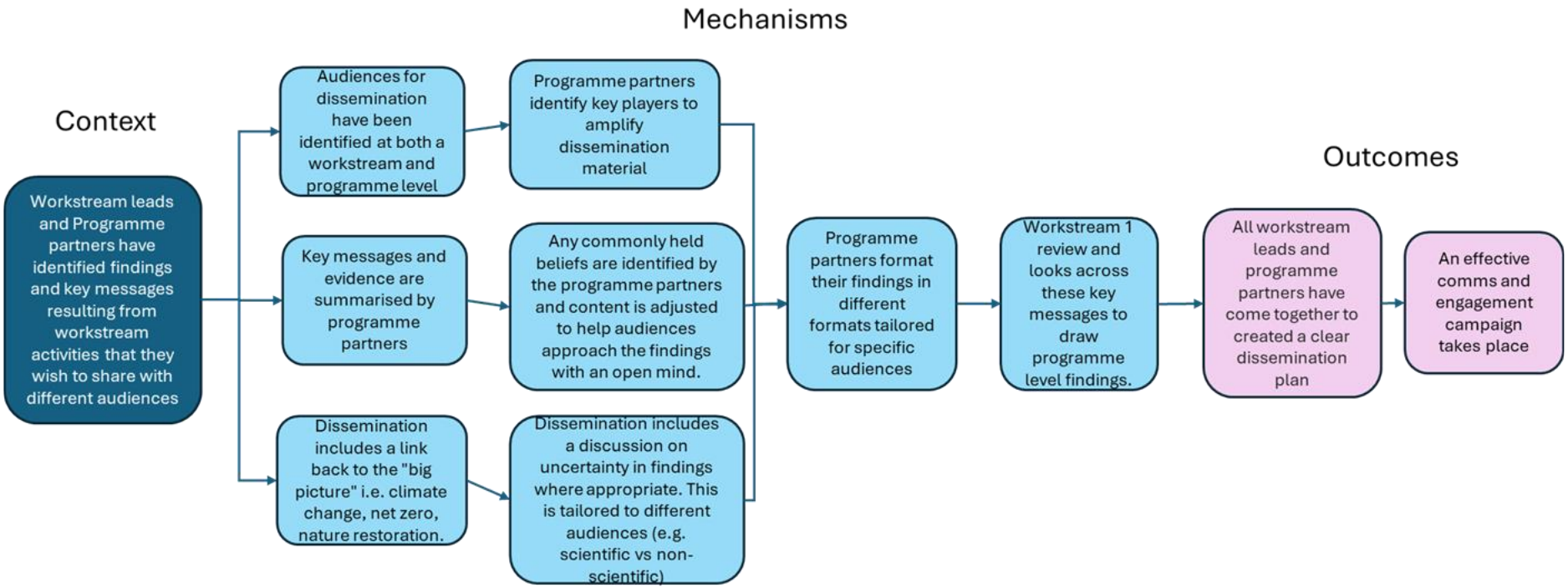


Figure A 2. Realist theory for dissemination of findings from a programme such as Nature Returns.

This Theory of Change have been put together using the principles above with the end outcomes being a clear dissemination plan and a Comms and Engagement campaign. It shows how the principles flow together to reach these outcomes.

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Annex 8: Research brief on embedding learning from the programme

Objective and method:

The Nature Returns programme has entered its final year of funding. The programme has brought together interdisciplinary work and collaboration cutting across Natural England, Environment Agency, RBG Kew and Forestry Commission. The programme has benefitted from tailoring the four workstreams to the strengths of each organisation. There have been several lessons learned regarding collaboration and co-ownership of a programme that cuts across various technical topics and processes. Looking forward, programme partners are wanting to create a strong legacy to enable future projects to learn from and build upon their work. To ensure that the learnings from the programme's innovative approach are carried into future programmes, these lessons need to be embedded at a higher organisational level.
To support this effort, ICF have conducted desk research on best practices for embedding learning from multi-organisational environmental projects. By taking a realist approach, the information was collected by asking questions such as, 'how will lessons from the programme be best embedded?' And answered through the lens of realist questions including what may work best for whom, to what extent, and in which contexts. The aim of this research is to provide relevant examples and identify actionable items that can be implemented by the programme partners to implement.

Key learnings from Nature Returns considered:

Key learnings were reviewed from the evaluation report published in January and developed from interviews with programme partners.

- Co-production and collaborative programme management across organisations (Natural England, Environment Agency, RGB Kew, and Forestry Commission)
- Adaptive and flexible programme management of partnership projects
- Managing multi-faceted projects and generating outputs (e.g. blended finance, governance, climate science, and habitat creation)

Findings:

Principles for evaluating the programme's learning strategy

Principles	Related questions	Data sources
1. **Learning strategy:** A learning strategy should be created by project partners to guide a clear path for collaboration that maps existing outputs and plans onto future work.	To what extent have programme partners created a learning strategy? How have programme partners agreed to the contents/method of the learning strategy?	Document Review Programme partner interviews Workshop

Principles	Related questions	Data sources
	How does the learning strategy aim to capture long-term learnings? To what extent will the learning strategy be applied to support future policy/programmes that are relevant to the Nature Returns programme?	
2. **Prioritise learnings:** Prioritise which learnings and/or components of the programme should be embedded and what the focus of the Nature Return's legacy will be. This should be viewed as a strategic vision to best capture what programme partners want the wider impacts of the programme to look like.	How has it been determined what the key learnings from the programme should be embedded or shared across the organisations? Which learnings are key and/or priority, and for whom are they key and/or priority? How do programme partners plan to share their priorities for embedding learnings from the programme?	Programme partner interviews Document review Workshop
3. **Collaboration:** The learning strategy should include a path for future collaboration and map existing plans for continued co-operation on projects that are products of the Nature Returns programme e.g. carbon science, land-use decision making tool, strategic funding strategies, oak banding/monitoring, agroforestry code set-up.	How do programme partners plan to continue to collaborate after the conclusion of the programme? To what extent will outputs be shared across programme partners that occur after the conclusion of the programme? Which structured ways for the programme partners to share these outputs is anticipated to work best? For whom?	Programme partner interviews Nature Returns workshop Document review
4. **Funding:** The Learning strategy should be allocated the necessary resource to be effective. Securing resources for the learning strategy will support continued engagement with programme partners and partnership projects.	How will resources be allocated towards carrying out the learning strategy within this phase of the programme? How will there be resource allocated to continue learning efforts after March 2025? Which funding options are available to support ongoing sharing of learnings? For whom	Programme partner interviews Document review

Principles	Related questions	Data sources
	are these funding options available?	
5. **Access to learnings:** Include how learnings from the programme will be accessed across the partner organisations. This may be through the creation of a learning platform or communities of practice for thematic learning.	To what extent will platforms be identified to record learnings? Which groups will be included in these platforms? For whom, or for which audiences will learnings be accessible? Who will be responsible for maintaining the resources and outputs of the programme in an accessible format?	Programme partner interviews Document review Workshop
6. **New roles for collating learning:** Create new roles that are tasked with maintaining co-production and related learnings.	To what extent have staff been identified to maintain co-production and the ways of working that were developed through Nature Returns? To what extent will staff roles be created for capturing learnings? How will this role ensure that findings are shared across the programme partner organisations?	Programme partner interviews Document review
7. **Training:** Provide training and/or support for staff working on similar project to provide lessons learned and prevent duplication of work.	To what extent is training in place to ensure that staff in related roles can use learnings from the programme? How will the training be delivered? Which formats will be used for different learnings?	Programme partner interviews Document review

The Theory

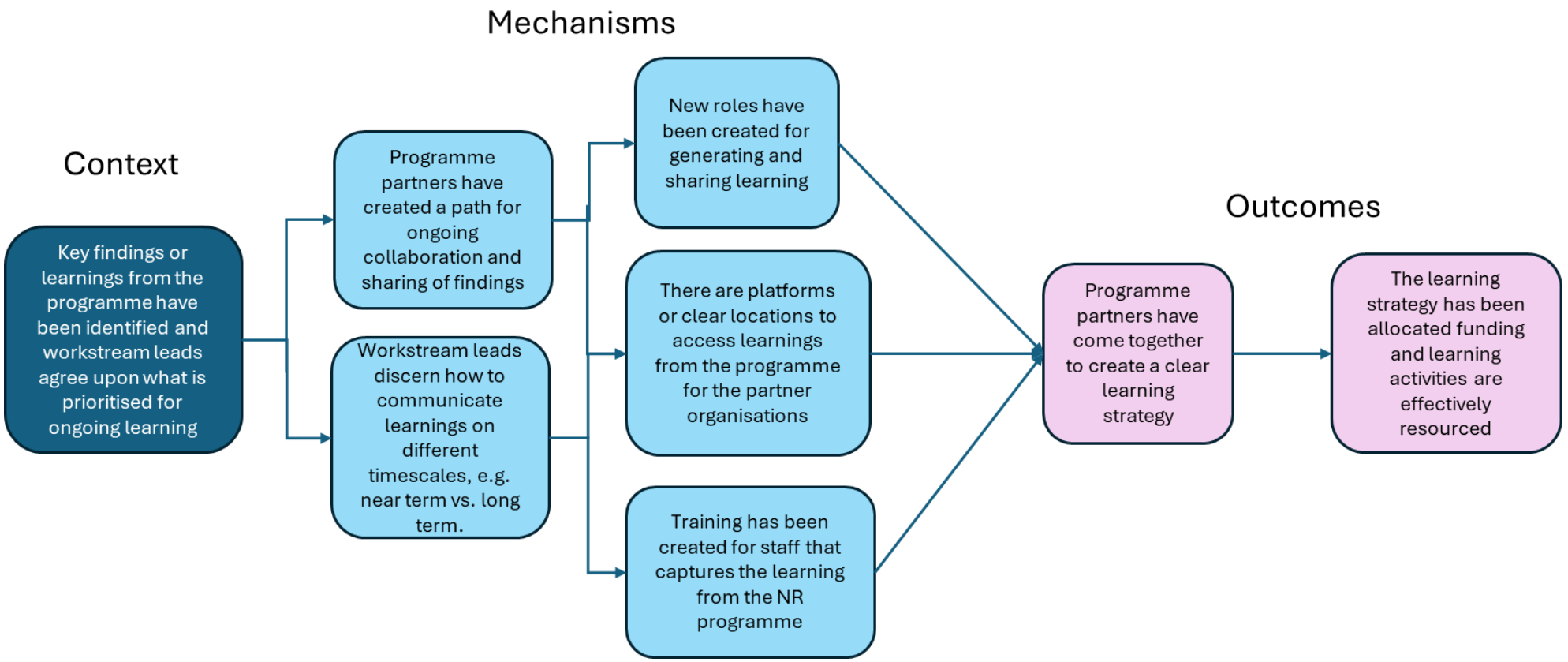

Figure A 3. Realist theory for embedding learning within organisations such as those involved in the Nature Returns Programme.

This Theory of Change have been put together using the principles above with the end outcomes being a clear learning strategy and secured funding to carry out long-term learning-focused activities. The diagram portrays how the principles may be carried out in a chronological flow to reach these outcomes.

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