



Access to Nature:

inspiring people to
engage with their
natural environment

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Executive Summary

About Access to Nature

Access to Nature is an ambitious grant programme funded by the Big Lottery Fund and run by Natural England as a Changing Spaces award partner. Since it opened for bids in April 2008, Natural England has distributed £28.75 million of funding, through a total of 115 grants, to projects that sought to bring about lasting change in the relationship between the natural environment and people across England.

With a focus on the engagement of people with little or no previous contact with nature, the programme has funded a diverse pool of projects from local community based schemes to large-scale national initiatives. Activities have been wide ranging and have included volunteering and educational opportunities, site improvements and the provision of new facilities or equipment to enable access to the natural environment. Five programme outcomes were addressed through these activities:

Outcome 1: A greater diversity and number of people having improved opportunities to experience the natural environment.

Outcome 2: More people having opportunities for learning about the natural environment and gaining new skills.

Outcome 3: More people able to enjoy the natural environment through investments in access to natural places and networks between sites.

Outcome 4: Richer, more sustainably managed, natural places meeting the needs of communities.

Outcome 5: An increase in communities' sense of ownership of local natural places, by establishing strong partnerships between communities, voluntary organisations, local authorities and others.

In 2012 the Big Lottery Fund provided a further £1.37 million for Access to Nature projects through Supporting Change and Impact, to enable projects in the last 18 months of their funding to explore how they could be more sustainable beyond Access to Nature funding.

Learning from Access to Nature

Icarus was appointed in Spring 2009 to develop and implement an evaluation process for the Access to Nature programme. This was a formative approach to evaluation, where the evaluation was on-going and fed back into management and planning processes to inform the development of the programme as it progressed.

The evaluation addressed a series of key questions within an evaluation framework that was developed by Icarus in conjunction with an Evaluation Reference Group. This framework was applied consistently from the start of the evaluation and was the principal guiding document for evidence gathering, analysis and feedback, within what was primarily a supported self-evaluation process.

This paper summarises the significant achievements of the Access to Nature programme. It forms part of the final round up of the evaluation process that has followed Access to Nature programme across its lifetime. In producing this paper, Icarus has drawn on a number of key sources of evidence which include: the final evaluation reports of over 80 projects; interim evaluation reports and learning papers produced by Icarus across the 5 years of Access to Nature; End of Grant reports; and a recent online survey of the programme's Lead Advisers.

An engagement system

Access to Nature has demonstrated the dynamic inter-relationship between the outcomes brought about by the programme activities, with the achievements associated with one outcome (such as learning) shaping and influencing others (such as the development of ownership).

In this way, Access to Nature was an 'engagement system', with each component and activity contributing at different levels and across different outcomes for participants.

Projects designed and adapted their practice to respond to the situations, needs and aspirations of those they were working with in communities. The evidence has shown that good engagement starts with a sound knowledge and understanding of the people to be engaged and that building relationships between people and nature is dependent on an ability to adapt and respond to participants' needs and ambitions as work progresses. Access to Nature has demonstrated the value of an approach grounded less in convention and more in adaptability, innovation and creativity.

Critically, this engagement system has embraced a new way of working which blended the core knowledge and skills associated with working with nature with the relationship building skills common to community development practice. Other key elements to the engagement system were the habit of forming good working collaborations with partners and organisations already on the ground in communities. These were important in overcoming barriers to engagement and creating resilient local structures and relationships. The need to make it easy for people to connect with nature has also been evidenced; for instance, by providing basic, but essential, resources to overcome practical barriers such as a lack of transport or suitable clothing.

A further pivotal relationship within the engagement system has been that between Natural England and those delivering the programme on its behalf. Natural England has evolved a new way of working, becoming an 'enabling funder', balancing support, challenge and accountability within a spirit of learning. This has facilitated reflective and enquiring practice from projects.

Significant achievements

Access to Nature has been highly successful. Whether considered in terms of the quality of the outcomes generated for people and nature or the programme's quantitative achievements, Access to Nature accomplished a great deal in establishing the connection and relationship between people and nature.

Connecting with communities

The scale of the programme's reach into communities, and the degree to which it has enabled positive outcomes for those who became involved, has been impressive. Nearly 950,000 people took up the opportunity to experience and enjoy nature, many for the very first time. Investment in local green spaces, many of them in the heart of communities, has been substantial; access improvements were made at over 2,800 sites across England and improvements to the quality of the natural environment undertaken at over 2,500 sites. This opened up the potential for those sites to reach new and wider audiences, and the aggregated figures show that nearly 640,000 people used the improved access to sites, and over 800,000 benefitted from the improvements to quality.

Crucially, the programme also enabled people to move on from their first encounters with the natural environment, offering them the chance to learn about nature and apply that learning through practical work in natural places. Over 640,000 people undertook a learning activity through Access to Nature, and nearly 42,000 people took the next step in their learning by participating in a training or development programme. This in turn generated commitment, leading to over 34,000 people volunteering to regularly give their time in caring for and maintaining natural places.

These opportunities to engage with the natural environment have generated substantial impact in three areas; wellbeing, learning and ownership, while simultaneously improving the quality of, and access to, local natural places.

Wellbeing benefits

The wellbeing benefits created by Access to Nature came about through the emphasis on the provision of new opportunities. As projects hooked people into first encounters with nature, they gave the chance for people to explore and discover new environments, and all they have to offer. This led to people describing and reporting a range of benefits, all of which have enhanced the wellbeing of participants.

- Children have found new places to play and to develop social skills.
- Adults have discovered nature (and things about themselves).
- People are more active, feel calmer and more relaxed.
- New friendships and connections have formed.
- Family relationships have been strengthened through the experience of doing things together.

Access to Nature has been excellent at providing this first connection with nature, and in helping people to feel confident to take the next step, often through the simple act of making it easy for people to know where they could access nature, how to get there, and what they could do when they got there.

Learning benefits

As people came into contact with nature, the programme gave them chances to learn. A great success of Access to Nature was its ability to use the outdoors as a classroom, where people gained an understanding of the natural world, how it works, and how it can be supported. A potent mix of simple learning opportunities combined with practically applying skills and knowledge in the outdoors alongside others was highly effective.

The programme gave people new knowledge that was brought to life by using it to improve local natural places, and encouraged many to move on to gain a formal qualification. It also supported mainstream learning for children and built a body of people in schools, children's centres and community organisations who are now confident outdoor learning practitioners. This means the programme has substantially added to the volume of people in England who know enough about their local green spaces to enjoy and appreciate them, to conserve and maintain them, and to help others to learn about them.

Ownership benefits

The relationships built through Access to Nature have been critical in achieving a sense of ownership and commitment among participants towards nature. The programme has provided strong evidence that, for people with limited experience of nature, a first encounter is not enough to change the way they think about, feel about or use the natural environment. It also demonstrated that building on first encounters *can* bring about those changes. Through a 'stepping stones' approach which works at the pace of those involved, an empowering style that gives people the chance to grow and do things themselves, and a belief in offering people the chance to work on projects that matter to them, Access to Nature fostered a sense of ownership of local natural places by local people.

The time now being spent by people outdoors, the new groups formed to care for local sites, the new activities being hosted by local people, and the new learning about the natural world, are all indicative of a step change in how people have come to regard and care for the natural environment.

Benefits for natural places

The success of the programme has been possible because of the focus on improving quality and access to local sites, and the willingness to offer people the chance to discover, learn and care for places close by. The combination of well targeted investment and people volunteering time and skills learnt through Access to Nature has meant that many natural places are now more visible, easier to access and navigate, better used, better managed, cleaner and more hospitable for wildlife habitats. The programme also contributed to increased biodiversity that will only be fully realised in years to come.

The shifts in knowledge and ownership achieved by the programme suggest that increases in quality and access will be lasting, as people use their new-found enthusiasm and skills to continue to conserve and manage natural places. In this way the programme has created a substantial legacy in the volume of people in communities who now know about, care for and have an active role in conserving the natural places around them.

1

Section one:

Introduction



1 Introduction

1.1 About this paper

This paper summarises the significant achievements of the Access to Nature programme in delivering lasting change in the relationship between the natural environment and people¹. It forms one part of the final round up of the evaluation process that has followed Access to Nature programme across its lifetime. A second, partner paper examines the learning about programme management that the evaluation has captured².

1.2 About Access to Nature

Access to Nature is a grant programme funded by the Big Lottery Fund and run by Natural England as a Changing Spaces award partner, opening for bids in April 2008. Natural England works on behalf of a consortium of eleven other major environmental organisations and has distributed £28.75 million of funding.

A total of 115 grants were awarded, ranging from £50,000 to £500,000, including three flagship projects, each awarded more than £500,000. The funded projects ranged from local community based schemes to national initiatives from large organisations. Diversity in scale was mirrored by a diversity and richness of projects. For example, many projects provided a range of volunteering and educational opportunities for local communities and young people who ordinarily face barriers to visiting the countryside. Some combined this with site improvements, whilst others provided new equipment or facilities to enable people with disabilities to access the natural environment.

In 2012 the Big Lottery Fund provided a further £1.37 million for Access to Nature projects through Supporting Change and Impact. The purpose of this funding was to enable projects in the last 18 months of their grant to review the way they worked and explore how they could be more sustainable in the long term and beyond the end of Access to Nature. Supporting Change funds of £507,222 were awarded to 52 projects. Of these, 12 were also successful with Supporting Impact applications, securing a further £1,026,373³.

Footnote 1 This reports utilises the Access to Nature evaluation data available up to the end of January 2014.

Footnote 2 Icarus (2013) *Access to Nature Final Evaluation Report*. UK: Natural England. See <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/>

Footnote 3 A summary of the evidence about progress in delivering Supporting Change and Impact will be published in July 2014.

1.3 The changes Access to Nature aimed to make

The Access to Nature consortium developed a broad, over arching vision that incorporated and reflected the aspirations for Changing Spaces. The goal for Access to Nature was to create high quality environments that are: valued and accessible; rich in wildlife and opportunities for learning, health and wellbeing; safe, clean and attractive and well used.

“Our aim is to bring lasting change to people’s awareness of, access to and engagement with the natural environment. By 2014 we want 1.7 million people to have benefited from this grant programme, through improved opportunities to experience and enjoy the natural environment.”⁴

Access to Nature was an ambitious demonstration of how to bring about lasting change in the relationship between the natural environment and people across England who had little or no previous contact with nature.

It set out to create connections and build awareness and understanding for people about the natural places around them. It was driven by the belief that, given the right opportunities, people who had previously seen the natural environment as irrelevant or peripheral to their lives, would discover the benefits of being outdoors, for themselves and for nature. They would then come to value those benefits and develop a level of care and commitment for the natural places around them.

These ambitions were articulated by a set of five programme level outcomes designed by the consortium to enable the vision to be realised. As a minimum requirement, all funded projects had to contribute to outcome five and at least one other. The programme was outcomes led – that is, as a primarily revenue funding stream, it focused on the outcomes the funding investments could make. Appendix 1 illustrates the relationship between the Changing Spaces and Access to Nature outcomes, as well as Natural England’s strategic outcomes.

In addition there were targets linked to each outcome and although data on these was collected, which provided a useful steer on the scale of the programme and the extent of its reach, they were of secondary interest to the consortium. Instead, the focus was on gaining an understanding of the changes Access to Nature could bring for nature and for people.

Footnote 4 This statement is drawn from the original bid in 2006 by English Nature on behalf of the consortium and then appears in the resulting grant agreement between Big Lottery Fund and Natural England . The wording of the outcomes have a similar evolution.

Table 1: Summary of Access to Nature outcomes and targets

Outcome	Number of projects working towards this outcome	Targets
Outcome 1: A greater diversity and number of people having improved opportunities to experience the natural environment.	113 projects	Target 1a: At least one million people to have improved opportunities to actively experience and enjoy the natural environment.
Outcome 2: More people having opportunities for learning about the natural environment and gaining new skills.	113 projects	Target 2a: 75,000 people will have a new learning opportunity related to the natural environment by 2014. Target 2b: 50,000 volunteers will have a new opportunity to actively participate in training and development programmes, gaining new skills by 2014.
Outcome 3: More people able to enjoy the natural environment through investments in access to natural places and networks between sites.	60 projects	Target 3a: Investment in access links and associated networks to 130 natural places by 2014. Target 3b: 325,000 people experiencing better links with the natural environment by 2014.
Outcome 4: Richer, more sustainably managed, natural places meeting the needs of communities.	77 projects	Target 4a: Investment in the quality of 100 natural places to better meet the needs of local people and wildlife. Target 4b: 250,000 people benefiting from physical improvements to their local natural environment. Target 4c: 5,000 people regularly participating in the care of these natural places over the lifetime of the programme.
Outcome 5: An increase in communities' sense of ownership of local natural places, by establishing strong partnerships between communities, voluntary organisations, local authorities and others.	115 projects	Target 5a: 100% of projects actively and positively engaging with local communities.

The table illustrates the balance between people focused and site focused activities (and between revenue and capital funding) within the programme. The large majority of projects sought to provide opportunities, create learning and build ownership, with around half the projects undertaking work on access improvements and two-thirds investing in the quality of local sites.

1.4 The people that Access to Nature set out to reach

Access to Nature was about making a difference for people with little or no previous experience of the natural environment. Projects were therefore required to focus on at least one of the following beneficiary groups.

- People currently under represented in terms of contact with the natural environment, including disabled people, the young, black and ethnic minority communities (BME), and older people.
- Communities and individuals experiencing social exclusion through disability, unemployment, age or economic and social disadvantage.
- People disadvantaged by where they live through a lack of accessible natural environments.

1.5 How the Access to Nature learning was captured

Icarus was appointed in Spring 2009 to develop and implement an evaluation process for the Access to Nature programme. This was a formative approach to evaluation, where the evaluation was on-going and fed back into management and planning processes to inform the development of the programme as it progressed.

The evaluation addressed a series of key questions within an evaluation framework that was developed by Icarus in conjunction with an Evaluation Reference Group (see Appendix 2). This framework was applied consistently from the start of the evaluation process and was the principal guiding document for evidence gathering, analysis and feedback, within what was primarily a supported self-evaluation process. This process included: an initial training workshop, access to an evaluation workbook, reporting templates, and feedback on the interim and final evaluation reports. The Natural England programme team included Lead Advisers who gave additional, day-to-day support on the evaluation as part of their role. Further information about the evaluation process is outlined in Appendix 3.

The evaluation generated a number of key sources of evidence that have been used in writing this paper.

- The projects' final evaluation reports (over 80 in total).
- Evaluation reports produced by Icarus across the lifetime of Access to Nature.
- An online survey of Lead Advisers.
- An analysis of projects' End of Grant reports, specifically focusing on their assessment of impact and their legacy.

2

Section two:

Access to Nature and its context



2. Access to Nature and its context

2.1 The benefits for people of engaging with the natural environment

The evidence base underpinning Access to Nature provides a strong argument for a programme of this type. It is the case that levels of engagement with the natural environment are lowest for the populations that tend to be concentrated in urban areas – namely, BME communities and members of the lowest socio economic groups⁵. People living in deprived urban areas underuse the green spaces that are closest to them because they are of poor quality and feel unsafe⁶. Yet, the health and wellbeing benefits of proximity to and engagement with the natural environment are well documented⁷.

The benefits include those associated with the physical activity commonly involved in spending time outdoors. As significant are the wider benefits that have been recognised including: recovery from stress, stimulating development in children, as well as providing opportunities for personal development and a sense of purpose in adults⁸. The evidence also reveals that people living in urban areas with access to nearby green space have better mental health than their peers in areas without such access⁹.

In addition, the argument for greater connections between people and the natural environment has been strengthened by the 2011 Natural Environment White Paper. This set out a clear aspiration for everyone to be able to make the most of what it calls ‘nature’s health service’¹⁰.

These are the kinds of benefits that Access to Nature projects worked towards. They sought to establish relationships between people and the natural environment; to maximise the benefits that such an engagement with the natural environment can deliver for people; and to build a care for and an enduring relationship between people and nature.

Footnote 5 Natural England (2011) *Monitoring of Engagement with the Natural Environment: The National Survey of People and the Natural Environment*. UK: Natural England.

Footnote 6 See for example:
CABE Space (2011) *Community Green – Using Local Spaces to Tackle Inequality and Improve Health*. UK: CABE Space.
Cabe Space (2010) *Urban Green Nation, Building the Evidence Base*. UK: CABE Space.
Cabe Space and the National Housing Federation, 2005. *Decent Homes, Decent Spaces*. UK: CABE Space.
National Housing Federation (2011) *Greener Neighbourhoods*. London: NHF.
Greater London Authority (2009) *Leading to a Greener London* (online). Available from <http://www.london.gov.uk/priorities/environment/vision-strategy/leading-to-a-greener-london>

Footnote 7 See for example:
Bragg, R., Wood, C., Barton, J., Pretty, J. (2013) *Let Nature Feed Your Senses*. UK: University of Essex.
Dobbs, Pretty, J. (2004) *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005*.

Footnote 8 Bird, 2007; Barton and Pretty, 2010; NEA, 2011; Wilson, 1984; cited in Bragg, Wood, Barton and Pretty, 2013.

Footnote 9 De Vries, Verheij, Groenwegen and Spreeuwenberg (2003) cited in Carroll and Pahl (2014) Carroll, L., Pahl, S. (2014) *Evaluating the Stepping Stones to Nature Project*. UK: Plymouth University.

Footnote 10 Natural Environment White Paper 2011, page 46.

2.2 The strategic context

The aspirations of Access to Nature sat comfortably with Natural England's statutory purpose and strategic outcomes. It embodied Natural England's strategic outcome to inspire people to value and conserve the natural environment (Natural England's strategic outcome 2) and has been an exemplar for the Government's goal to *"add value to the hard work of others, and secondly enable new partnerships to address local and national challenges – always endeavoring to build the capacity of local communities and society to act"*¹¹. The relationship between Access to Nature and Natural England's strategic outcomes is summarised in Appendix 1.

2.3 The operating context

Access to Nature was conceived at a time when the external funding climate was significantly different to that which prevails today. What happened in the meantime, as a result of the economic downturn, affected a high proportion of Access to Nature projects in a number of ways.

- *Redundancies in other organisations* reduced the capacity of those partners to contribute to Access to Nature projects e.g. as Steering Group members or delivery partners.
- *An increasingly difficult fundraising environment* affected projects' ability to secure match and 'top up' funding.
- *Reduced resources in partner organisations* led to re-ordering of priorities leaving them unable to contribute to the Access to Nature projects in the way that had been planned.
- *Reduced funding for beneficiary groups* and their support organisations resulted in less capacity to respond to invitations to participate in Access to Nature projects.
- *Cuts in partner agencies* affected their ability to make referrals to Access to Nature projects.
- *Volunteers able to offer substantial or long term commitment were in short supply* given the growing demand for services to be volunteer led rather than by paid officers¹².
- *Loss of specific services / huge reductions in capacity internally* by services that would typically make a significant contribution to a project e.g. parks services, youth services, advisory teaching teams led to skills and capacity gaps for some projects.
- *Uncertainty in partner agencies* made them unwilling to commit their resources to being involved in Access to Nature projects.

Footnote 11 HM Government (2011) *The Natural Choice: Securing the Value of Nature*. UK: Defra.

Footnote 12 Further information about volunteering across Access to Nature projects is summarised in the following Learning Paper:

Icarus (2011) *Volunteering in Nature*. UK: Natural England.

See <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/>

These factors have required projects to respond and adapt accordingly. In many instances they slowed early progress, as the assumptions that proposals were based on proved to be unreliable. Projects had to demonstrate a high degree of resilience in these circumstances. For example, they had to proceed with reduced partner input, or less stability within partner organisations, than envisaged; attention had to be paid to engaging partners in low-resource ways; referral processes had to be re-thought or new referrers¹³ brought on board; and project 'add ons' had to be minimised to reduce the need for additional fundraising.

Equally, it was important that Natural England maintained a flexible approach to enable projects to adapt to these changing circumstances. Natural England also re-negotiated with the Big Lottery Fund to increase the maximum percentage input the programme could make to projects in circumstances where other sources of matched funding were less available than anticipated.

Footnote 13 The term 'referrers' describes the organisations that referred individual beneficiaries or beneficiary groups to Access to Nature projects. They were commonly organisations that were in direct contact with or provided a support role for those beneficiaries.

3

Section three:

Access to Nature as an engagement system



3 Access to Nature as an engagement system

3.1 Complexity and inter-connectedness

Before presenting the evidence about impact it is important to emphasise a **key piece of learning that has emerged from the Access to Nature evaluation**. While the narrative thus far has presented the five Access to Nature outcomes as discrete components, the evaluation has shown that, in practice, they have been continuously inter-related. Activities and achievements associated with one particular outcome (such as learning) would shape and influence other aspects of a project (such as building ownership).

The relationship between the outcomes is a dynamic one, and as a result it is helpful to understand Access to Nature as an ‘engagement system’. While each component (or outcome) in the system has made an important contribution to the goal of encouraging more people to benefit from the natural environment, this has not been achieved in isolation. Rather, an implicit inter-connectedness and mutuality has been observed.

What has also been highlighted is the significance of two key, underpinning factors. The evaluation has shown that effective engagement starts with a **good knowledge and understanding of the people to be engaged**, and thereafter requires a **responsiveness to their particular needs and aspirations** in designing and delivering project work. In addition, the existence of a rigorous and formative monitoring and evaluation process (a ‘learning programme’), and continuing responsiveness to learning and the operating context, are equally important.

This is undoubtedly complex to unpick and to understand. What is clear however is that any one of the Access to Nature outcomes would not have been sufficient to achieve the programme goals. Commonly projects’ activities would not be designed to simply achieve one outcome, they would be addressing several outcomes and delivering multiple benefits and impacts. This inter-connectedness was made more explicit by the evaluation process that encouraged both the programme management team and projects to see beyond the monitoring and reporting against individual outcomes.

This is the key principle of Access to Nature – that achieving a complex goal requires processes that work on a number of levels and address several strands at one time.

3.2 Understanding the engagement system and about this report

Understanding the success of such a complex programme is not straightforward. There are many inter-connections and dependencies at play, and they need to be understood in terms of a single picture of progress against the programme's ambitions.

Presenting this picture in written form is not easy. As a result, and for the purpose of simplicity, this paper relies on the structure of the programme five outcomes as the main organising device. This gives readers a sense of the progress that has been made against the individual outcome, each one as an element of the overall system. Each outcome is examined in turn as follows.

- Achievement of the targets relevant to the outcome.
- A description of what projects did to deliver that outcome.
- The changes projects achieved in terms of their progress against the specific indicators relevant to that outcome.

This is followed by an assessment of the ways in which projects designed their delivery to respond to the characteristics, needs and aspirations of the people they were working with. These features underpinned how projects approached every aspect of their work as they strove to achieve their outcomes.

4

Section four:

Outcome 1

A greater diversity and number of people having improved opportunities to experience the natural environment



4 Outcome 1

A greater diversity and number of people having improved opportunities to experience the natural environment

“At the end of the day the sun appeared, allowing us the pleasure of leaving our site in the beauty of the winter sunset. In that moment I couldn’t wait to see what the area would look like in summer when violets bloom and the butterflies appear.”

Morecambe Bay Wealth of Wildlife, Wildlife Trust for Lancashire

4.1 The number of people who benefited from a new opportunity

Programme Target	At least 1 million people to have improved opportunities to actively experience and enjoy the natural environment.
Final Target Numbers	971,548 people have had the opportunity to actively experience and enjoy the natural environment ¹⁴ .

4.2 The approach projects have taken... ‘hooking’ people in

Providing opportunities for people to take part in and enjoy activities in the natural environment was a key aspect of Access to Nature projects’ efforts to engage people in experiencing the outdoors. This required a fresh approach in many instances, with projects adapting their usual practice to be responsive to the needs and previous engagement experience of their target groups (see section 9 for further information).

Where projects were working in new areas or with new kinds of beneficiary groups, they needed to ‘hook’ people into their activities – they needed to find a way of making the natural environment relevant and of interest to people who had little in the way of a track record of engaging with it. This challenge was tackled using a range of strategies.

Footnote 14 Target figures collated by Natural England, 31 March 2014.

One off events

“We deliberately chose activities that were relatively easy for people to join in with, requiring no further commitment, as we found in the past this could be a barrier to making the first step.”

Access to Nature in Leeds, The Conservation Volunteers

One off events were commonly used to attract people for the first time. Many different approaches were tried, including large-scale public festivals, family fun days, taster sessions, school visits, snorkelling trips and boat trips, as well as attending high profile events hosted by other organisations. In engaging the target groups and reaching people for the first time, projects took account of a number of factors.

- *Using alternative means of promotion* such as word of mouth or using trusted intermediaries.
- *Selecting ‘neutral’ locations* within, or close to, where target groups live.
- *Providing a range of activities* that appealed to a broad range of people.
- *Accommodating specific needs* such as prayer rooms for Islamic groups and providing access for people with physical disabilities.
- *Making it easy to join in* so people could take part without booking in advance.
- *Following up* attendees with information about other events and the ways in which they could become involved in the project.

Varied and practical activities

“The emphasis is on enjoyment and offering new experiences that are interesting and stimulating.”

People and the Dales, Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust

“Scientific concepts are drip-fed opportunistically rather than pushed onto participants as a priority.”

Plymouth Blue Sound, Marine Biological Association

Projects found ways to pique the interest and capture the imagination of people who would not traditionally engage with the natural environment. They thought laterally about what would motivate people to get involved in their activities, and they considered how they could introduce people to the natural environment in creative yet relevant ways.

<i>Capturing the imagination by using innovative approaches</i>	<p>Wildlife in the City, Nottingham Wildlife Trust</p> <p>A webcam showing footage of peregrine falcons nesting in the city centre captured the imagination of many residents, far beyond the traditional audience of nature enthusiasts.</p>
<i>Focusing on 'fun' and 'themes' rather than an overt focus on 'nature' or 'conservation'</i>	<p>Setting the Scene for Nature, Community Forest Trust</p> <p>The 'Elf and Fairy Fair' and 'Mab's Magical Fair' were large scale community events, held in local woodlands, using fun, nature focused activities, to engage residents with the woods for the first time.</p>
<i>Offering a menu of activities that catered to different preferences</i>	<p>Getting Out There, Imayla</p> <p>Activities from bush craft, survival skills, circus skills, felt making, mountain biking and green wood working, to music making and puppet making, were offered to young people from varied cultural backgrounds during the project's residential trips.</p>
<i>Keeping activities simple and effective so they could be easily replicated</i>	<p>Connecting Naturally, Earth Trust</p> <p>Parents were given simple bird identification sheets to take home to replicate the bird watching they had taken part in with their children during outdoor play sessions.</p>
<i>Using practical activities that encourage group working</i>	<p>Rupert's Wood, Student Community Action Newcastle</p> <p>Young people were involved in wildlife monitoring, running activity days for children, tree maintenance, and bracken bashing at a country site and 'guerrilla gardening' teams and a food growing project in Newcastle to encourage a connection with nature through teamwork.</p>
<i>Providing an exhilarating experience of the natural environment</i>	<p>Environmental Education and Access, Nottingham YMCA</p> <p>Outdoor sessions always incorporated an activity based around learning about the natural environment. For example, canoeing sessions were preceded by pond dipping, mountain biking combined with tree measuring and ageing.</p>
<i>Using the arts and different media</i>	<p>Canal Connections, Canal and River Trust</p> <p>A range of arts activities were used to engage local people and to generate an interest in the canal: an animated film; four large puppets linked to canal wildlife; art based interpretation panels; a wildlife inspired dance project; and an interactive treasure hunt.</p>

4.3 Project achievements

“The importance of play was noted for children from the Action for Young Carers project. Some were quite quiet and withdrawn at the start of the day, but soon began to talk and smile. One little boy spent much of his time chattering, asking questions, running skipping and jumping.... To spend time simply playing, discovering, inventing, free from the challenges of their home lives, sharing their ideas with adults who were simply there to support them, must have been very valuable to these children.”

Walk on the Wildside, Castle Cavendish Foundation, Nottingham

The opportunity to take part in activities in the natural environment gave a substantial number of people a ‘breathing space’ where they could relax, enjoy being out of doors, and benefit from a sense of freedom that may be uncommon in their everyday lives. Multiple wellbeing benefits were evident for individuals and groups, as well as positive outcomes for communities, all as a direct result of providing the opportunity for people to have a positive experience of engagement with the natural environment. The benefits for specific targeted groups – such as young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs), people with learning disabilities, young carers, visually impaired young people, homeless people and women only groups, for example – have, in addition, been emphatic¹⁵.

Footnote 15 Further information about the benefits to NEET young people across Access to Nature projects is summarised in the following Learning Paper:
Icarus (2012) *Changing Young Lives – Engaging NEET young people in the natural environment*. UK: Natural England.
See <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/>

Call of the Wild (*Circle of Life Rediscovery, Sussex*) provided new learning opportunities outdoors for young Travellers and Gypsies, young carers and other NEET young people through woodland programmes. The project worked closely with schools that helped to identify young people from the target beneficiary groups. Teachers noted the cumulative impacts of being involved in such a positive programme.

“They have learnt practical skills, such as fire-lighting, whittling and carving, cooking, wildlife recognition and from these skills, they have gained experiences of success in achieving non-academic tasks. They have also formed closer relationships with other students, school staff and course staff in small close groups, creating bonds, friendships and interdependencies. Their successes have led to greater self-belief, confidence and self-control, and a reduction in anger / misbehaviour. By being actively involved and keen to participate, their concentration levels and attention span have improved and increased.”

Assistant Teacher from a participating school

Back at school, the young people have good memories and examples of successes that school staff can refer to and remind them of when problems arise. The young people are also more willing to attempt tasks that they would not have tried before. Relationships with school staff are more open and trusting and the young people are generally more willing to listen and accept advice.

People have benefited from a space for play and for risk taking

“One specific benefit mentioned by teachers was the positive effect of the project on pupils’ attitude to risk. Working and playing in the outdoors, making dens, building fires and so on had previously been seen as dangerous and to be avoided. Enjoying these activities in the project allowed children to see them as risky but permitted, as long as they did them appropriately and safely.”

There is Space Here, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust

Children and adults alike benefited from the freedom the natural environment offered for outdoor play and risk taking.

- Projects have shown how children *embraced the opportunity to play* freely outside and to get muddy.
- Young people were *liberated* from having to maintain an aura of cool among their peers.
- Adults adopted a more *child-like attitude* resulting in a joyful atmosphere during activities.

The **Young Carers Nature Challenge** (TCV, Dorset) was a project that provided outdoor experiences for young carers, giving them the opportunity to be relieved of their caring roles and to go out and meet new people. A lot of parents commented on how their young carers came home from activity days happy and excited, talking non-stop about their experiences; the natural environment, free from their everyday pressures, had given them valuable 'breathing space'.

"M' had an absolutely gorgeous time. Didn't stop talking about it for ages, and it's unusual for 'M' to talk so much! liked it from start to finish."

"F' came home with rosy cheeks, buzzing and happy looking. 'F' very much enjoyed just being able to be a 'boy' for the day and switch off from some of the worries from home."

People have reported health improvements

"Visiting a farm might sound like just a nice day out, which it certainly is, but for our residents the benefit to their physical and mental wellbeing was huge. When residents have visited a farm we've seen a huge transformation with people laughing, smiling and talking. Even after the visits, we've noticed that the residents seem calmer, happier and will sleep better at night."

Let Nature Feed Your Senses, LEAF / Sensory Trust

People involved in Access to Nature projects reported a number of health and wellbeing benefits¹⁶.

- *Being more physically active* through volunteering or making more use of green spaces in their own time.
- *A sense of calm and of de-stressing* as a result of time spent out of doors.
- The *therapeutic value* of the natural environment.

It should be recognised however that measuring health outcomes is not straightforward, and any attribution has to be made with care. A number of Access to Nature projects sought to capture evidence about the health and wellbeing benefits of their work, some using rigorous measures and others relying on participant self-reporting and anecdotal feedback.

There is however evidence that suggests there are immediate health benefits from one- off participation, as well as longer-term engagement¹⁷.

Footnote 16 Further information about the health and wellbeing benefits of two Access to Nature projects is summarised in the following Learning Papers:
Icarus (2011) *Best Foot Forward – The benefits of the natural environment for mental and physical health (Discovery Quest Model)*. UK: Natural England.
Icarus (2014) *Let Nature Feed Your Senses – Sensory rich visits connecting people to nature and food*. UK: Natural England.
See <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/>

Footnote 17 Bragg, R., Wood, C., Barton, J., Pretty, J., 2013. *Let Nature Feed Your Senses*. UK: University of Essex.

Discovery Quest (*Julian Housing Support, Norwich*) engaged people whose mental health difficulties had a significant impact on the way that they managed their lives. The project was designed around a series of six month walking programmes, where people spent quality time in green and wild places. With assistance from the University of Essex, Julian Housing Support measured and recorded significant positive changes in mental wellbeing across their programme participants. They also evidenced physical health benefits, with nearly all participants showing a decrease in Body Mass Index and over half showing a decrease in their Waist to Hips Ratio.

Participants described in their own words how they felt better in themselves, and had gained confidence and a sense of achievement through physical challenge.

"I have met new people, learnt new things and I have learnt that I can relax and not panic. This is a useful skill when coming down mountains."

"I didn't have a good day yesterday but when I got to the top and it all opened up in front of me, I started to put things in order and it all started to make sense."

"Discovery Quest has done more for me than I could have imagined, it has released my spirit and I feel completely different."

Peter, was a regular volunteer with **Wyke Beck Valley Pride** (*Leeds City Council*). He is 40 and married with four children, but hasn't worked since he was 16 due to his epilepsy. His deeply personal account of volunteering for the project is very revealing of the health and wellbeing benefits that he and his family have derived from their involvement in the project.

"I feel I have lost the whole of my life due to the epilepsy. I've always done my own garden and helped my neighbours with theirs, but I didn't do anything else with my time. I have volunteered without fail every Friday since I started the project. Coming out and working with the Wyke Beck Group leaves me feeling good. My confidence has improved because I'm getting out and working away from my home. I had to feel safe with my epilepsy first, working with other people, knowing they could help me and manage when I needed them."

"I recommended the Wyke Beck Project to my brother; it's helped him with his drinking. I have encouraged my son to come out with us too! It's a great feeling making a flask on a Friday morning, knowing I'm going out to work. I know it's volunteering but I love it, it gives me so much. I feel inspired by this group if I wasn't here I'd be stuck at home. I am really proud that I have achieved something. I have never had a pair of work boots before. It feels great!"

People have built new relationships

“I didn’t know anyone when I went to do tree planting. The company was good; I find it funny when others speak their own language. I made friends with people I would not normally make friends with from different cultures”.

Making The Most Of What We’ve Got, ORBE, Bradford

The experience of doing something together in a new environment made a powerful contribution to the development and cementing of relationships. Projects noted many ways in which their activities made a difference: family bonds became closer; new friendships were formed; connections were made across age groups, cultures and backgrounds; and there was improved teamwork, communications and relationships within established groups.

As the **Sowe Valley Project’s** (*Warwickshire Wildlife Trust*) work to improve the river environment developed, and volunteers were recruited, the project gave time and space for people to find out about each other and enjoy each other’s company. Volunteers reported that, while a commitment to nature may have been the primary reason to begin volunteering, social interaction and new friendships were often the reason they stayed involved.

“The chance to come down here and work with absolutely super people, it’s great. I can’t say enough about the friendships we’ve created.”

Sowe Valley volunteer

The project also found that bringing younger people and older people together on tasks allowed both to understand more about the other, and allowed friendships to build across generations.

One example is the tale of two Toms. Tom the elder, who is retired and committed to improving the river, and Tom the younger, who is 22, out of work and suffers from ADHD. The two Toms, unprompted, became friends and supporters of each other. Tom the younger helped Tom the elder with heavier work, checked to see he was OK, helped him in and out of the river, and asked his advice on the best way to achieve a task. Tom the elder gave advice, shared his experience and encouraged Tom the younger. The project believed the friendship would not have formed without the chance for the two Toms to work together on restoring the river.

People report a sense of achievement

“The children have gained more than from any school based project. Nervous children have become brave, children who disappear in the classroom have become leaders and gained respect from their peers...the feel of the earth and the mud and the woods has awakened their senses and interest in the world around them.”

Early Learning in Nature, Sightlines, Newcastle

Substantial developmental benefits of participating in Access to Nature projects have been noted, particularly for children and young people.

- Increased *curiosity* and sense of enquiry.
- Improved *imagination*.
- Gains in *speech and language development*.
- More *motivation to learn*.
- *Confidence* and self-esteem boosted.
- Improved levels of *resilience*.
- Better *behaviour*.

PUSHing Down the Barriers (*Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust*) was a youth engagement project running across the South Hampshire region. The project worked primarily with NEET young people and offered them opportunities to learn about and contribute to the management of local open spaces.

As well as participating in regular work party sessions, the volunteers helped out at events. This required a different range of skills and some of the young people thrived on the opportunity to share their knowledge with others. Some of the participants were initially very shy but became confident in dealing with the public. This shows not only the practical skills that the young people gained but the communication skills and increase in self-confidence.

63 of the project's regular volunteers attained their John Muir Discovery Award, the first qualification many of these young people had ever achieved.

People have increased confidence to continue accessing the natural environment

“I’ve been back to the beach and looked at the rock pools – I wouldn’t have done that before. I know what kinds of things I can do there now. Like when we go to the woods we know what we can do with the kids. Like looking for different textures or colours. And it doesn’t cost anything. You can spend all day in the woods and it’s free.”

Hastings Wild Things, RSPCA

It was a key aspiration for many Access to Nature projects to enable people to continue benefiting from engagement with the natural environment. They sought to build people’s confidence so they would continue to visit, and be appreciative of the natural environment independently. There were three elements that were key to building people’s confidence; and projects were more successful in building confidence when they addressed these three overtly, compared to those projects that assumed people would build confidence simply by being involved in their activities.

- Equipping people with the knowledge of *what* they could do outdoors.
- Equipping people with the knowledge of *where* they could go to access the natural environment.
- Equipping people with the understanding of *how* to get to natural places, be they local / doorstep green spaces or using public transport to go further afield.

Walk on the Wildside (Castle Cavendish Foundation, Nottingham) worked in a highly deprived area in the heart of the city, a focal point for urban regeneration initiatives for some years, and very ethnically diverse. Despite some significant green spaces on their doorstep, local people had minimal interaction with nature. From the outset the project recognised that it had to build the confidence of local groups and individuals, to move away from the culture of dependency that the area suffered from. During years two and three the Project Co-ordinator worked hard to hand over responsibility to local groups. She started by asking them where they would like to go, and over time and with her support, they started to plan, arrange and lead their own trips and activities.

“The last twelve months were a turning point, there was a big transition for groups and that was the tipping point. (Up to that point) ... we didn’t know whether we were going to meet this goal [groups organising independent visits].”

Project Co-ordinator

Benefits for communities

“There is a lovely feeling of the whole community working together.”

Wild London Inclusive London, London Wildlife Trust

Access to Nature projects provided insights into how their work resulted in community benefits in a number of ways.

<p><i>Reduced incidence of anti-social behaviour (ASB)</i></p>	<p>Change of Scene, Northampton Borough Council Police and residents’ associations suggested that Change of Scene was a key factor in the reduced prevalence of ASB on target estates - it provided diversionary activities for young people and the potential to be excluded from the project if they committed an offence was a key incentive for them.</p>
<p><i>Reduced inter-estate rivalry</i></p>	<p>Change of Scene, Northampton Borough Council Improved community behaviour was attributed to the project and the positive relationships developed across areas whilst taking part in the project. Initially described as “the almost violent polarisation of the estates” was transformed into “the Change of Scene family”.</p>
<p><i>Contributed to more cohesive local communities</i></p>	<p>Wild Places, Octopus Community Network New biodiversity habitats were created at four community centres. This contributed to more cohesive and stronger local communities as people came together to create and maintain the sites.</p>
<p><i>People more connected to their neighbours</i></p>	<p>Natural Estates, London Wildlife Trust The provision of estate based activities to improve the immediate environment brought people out, working together and building new relationships with each other.</p>
<p><i>Strengthened intra community relationships</i></p>	<p>Faith Woodlands Communities, Luton Council of Faiths Community groups and faith groups came together to experience a local woodland and improve local green spaces. This prompted new collaborations between groups, including Muslim, Polish and other community based groups.</p>

5

Section five:

Outcome 2

More people having improved opportunities for learning about the natural environment and gaining new skills



5. Outcome 2

More people having improved opportunities for learning about the natural environment and gaining new skills

“All the activities we run within the programme have a learning outcome, whether it be a 1 hour guided walk, 5 hour workshop or a full day family event.”

Wild Norfolk, Norfolk Wildlife Trust

5.1 The number of people who learnt something new

Programme Target	75,000 people (excluding volunteers) will have a new learning opportunity related to the natural environment by 2014	50,000 volunteers will have a new opportunity to actively participate in training and development programmes, gaining new skills, by 2014
Final Target Numbers	471,728 people accessed a new learning opportunity related to the natural environment	43,867 volunteers actively participated in training and development programmes, gaining new skills

5.2 How Access to Nature helped people to learn

Access to Nature offered a huge range of learning choices and opportunities to children, young people and adults across England. Projects provided learning that was structured, experiential, practical and based in exploration and discovery.

Structured learning opportunities were commonly designed to fit with the needs of those doing the learning. The style, frequency, length, timing and accessibility of courses were adjusted to fit around learners. In some instances, especially where opportunities were made available for young people who were NEET or adults who were out of work, Access to Nature provided people with their first positive experiences of learning.

For many, their learning was informal, achieved through spending time with others in natural places or by working to enhance or maintain those places. Natural places also provided many children, and those who work with them, the chance to learn outdoors.

The common strand running through the learning work delivered through Access to Nature was the use of the outdoors as a classroom; to gain an improved understanding of nature, how nature works, and how nature is affected, positively or adversely, by the actions of people¹⁸.

5.3 Project achievements

Learning took many forms for a high number of people across Access to Nature, from pre-school children discovering how to build hotels for 'mini-beasts', to pensioners learning how to make fragranced bath bombs from flowers. Participants in Access to Nature projects gained knowledge about the nature around them, and learnt practical skills to shape, conserve and care for local green spaces. The projects offered a potent mix of simple, accessible short courses and learning opportunities combined with the chance to learn through doing by finding out about nature and helping to look after it. For many, applying this new learning through practical action, coupled with the social benefits of working with others and the satisfaction of achievement, was the key gain for them. Others chose to take their learning further, becoming outdoor leaders themselves, or gaining qualifications that helped sharpen skills and better apply knowledge, enhancing their contribution to nature, and their own prospects for further training or employment.

Footnote 18 Further information about education and learning in Access to Nature projects is summarised in the following Learning Papers:

Icarus (2011) *Learning Together – Schools and the natural environment sector*. UK: Natural England.

Icarus (2012) *A Natural Curiosity – Good quality outdoor experiences are a valuable part of children's development*. UK: Natural England.

See <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/>

People know more about the natural environment

“There are so many living things around us and we don’t even realise it.”

Dove Stone - Nature at the Heart of Urban Communities, RSPB, Oldham

Access to Nature enabled the diverse range of people involved in projects to gain knowledge about the natural world around them. For many, this knowledge of the natural environment was gained through a first experience, or a re-connection, with nature. The programme provided opportunities for large numbers of individuals from groups that would traditionally lack connection with natural spaces to gain knowledge for the first time.

The knowledge gained was wide-ranging and was more than an abstract understanding of what nature is. It instead offered people a sense of discovery and a chance to apply their new knowledge by interacting with plants, trees, habitats, water, mud and sand.

The variety of style, frequency and accessibility of learning opportunities meant that people gained knowledge in new and engaging ways, in new, natural settings. The style of learning across many projects encouraged enquiry, through an active dialogue about practical interactions with nature, and knowledge was gained through an openness to ask and listen.

The evaluations carried out by projects show the areas people learnt most about. This list below confirms that the programme did more than simply convey information about nature; it added to the volume of people in England who know enough about their local green spaces to be able to enjoy and appreciate them, and to take part in conserving and caring for them.

- Participants have reported *increased knowledge and ability to identify* different aspects of local natural places – plants, trees, animals, birds, and insects.
- People describe *a fuller understanding of the make up of nature* and having discovered more about the range of plants and animals, or the biodiversity, that lives in spaces they now visit.
- People can identify the importance and value of *good conservation activity*.
- People have described having *better knowledge of how wildlife and natural places behave and change*, the impacts of weather and of human actions on nature, and an understanding of how to interact safely with nature.
- Participants report having *gained knowledge of how to manage natural places* for the benefits of wildlife and natural habitats.

Wild Places (*Octopus Community Network*) located in and around four community centres in Islington, London, created an after school club to raise awareness and awaken a joy of the natural world amongst local children. Children of all ages with little or no access to green spaces at home or school were introduced to wildlife that could be found in an urban environment. The staff found that children were nervous of insects at first, fearing that they were poisonous, or that earwigs crawled into your ears and made you deaf.

Children learnt about the mini-beasts, identifying them on a spotter chart, learning to identify creatures from their webs, trails, footprints or droppings and keeping a log of what they found. The sessions built a love of the outdoors among the children.

“Charlie has learnt more from his session here than a full week at school, he is relaxed and can’t wait for the next session. It’s the first time he has looked forward to anything, and loves to chat about what he’s done, seen or made. He has also made some friends and has really come out of his self.”

Parent

The Club gained two awards as recognition of their achievements in introducing children to nature, and inspired a second local school to set up their own Wild Places Club.

People have the skills to care for the natural environment

The same diverse range of people who gained knowledge about the natural environment also learnt how to apply that knowledge and to care for the natural world around them. Skills were developed across a range of conservation techniques and were used to improve and manage green spaces in woodland, river, canal, coastal, urban and rural environments.

While longer and more sequential opportunities were offered by some projects, a typical learning experience for many Access to Nature participants was an evening of training in how to identify species, an afternoon of learning how to maintain a footpath or a morning on the safe use of tools, for example. Coupled with the chance to practice skills through one-off or occasional work parties, volunteer programmes and more structured follow-on learning, this pattern of easily accessible and practical learning proved highly successful.

Teaching was largely achieved through an informal style, often delivered by project staff known to participants. This ensured that people made the most of the learning opportunities available to them. Across the programme, there were many accounts of children, young people and adults growing in confidence as they learnt more and discovered new abilities in caring for nature and working with others.

The project evaluations highlighted the skills that have been most commonly developed by participants. The list below shows that, in addition to creating a cohort of people more knowledgeable about the natural places around them, Access to Nature also contributed to creating a skilled workforce of individuals and groups studying, managing and caring for those places.

- Conducting wildlife and species surveys, and how to sample water based environments.
- The creation or maintenance of habitats for wildlife.
- Woodland and tree management.
- The installation and maintenance of footpaths and boardwalks.
- Fencing, hedge laying and dry stone walling.
- Learning how to contribute to the overall management of natural places.
- Understanding safety in the outdoors, in particular the safe use of tools and managing fire safely.
- Identifying and removing invasive plants.
- Navigation and map reading.
- Basic survival (such as shelter building) and bushcraft skills (cooking outdoors for example).

Stepping Stones to Nature (*Staffordshire Wildlife Trust*) provided a range of practical, and largely informal, learning opportunities and coupled this with a supported volunteering programme to allow participants to put their skills and knowledge into practice.

The project gathered feedback from over 600 participants, and discovered that 90% of those trained identified one new practical skill they had gained, with 64% identifying two new skills. Asked to describe these skills, the participants gave a picture of the range of talents they had developed through their training.

- 67% had gained practical management tasks linked to different habitats.
- 56% now know how to use tools safely when working outdoors.
- 41% reported knowing how to create new habitats for wildlife.
- 18% felt they now knew how to identify different plants and birds.
- 14% said they were more skilled in improving and maintaining paths.
- 11% in building and maintaining dry stone walling.

These skills were used across 19 sites, enabling scrubland to be cleared, gorse to be coppiced, invasive species to be removed, trees to be thinned and new habitats and access improvements to be created.

"We were challenged and tested in new ways and have developed a greater sense of environmental responsibility through the work we've done."

Trainee

People have become qualified to care for the environment and to deliver learning themselves

Formal learning was delivered by a number of Access to Nature projects, either as a direct offer or as an opportunity for participants to move on from shorter courses or practical outdoor learning.

Many of those who chose to take up formal learning opportunities had limited histories of academic success. This meant that the programme provided a first constructive educational experience for some, and that the qualifications gained may have been the first they have succeeded in (particularly NEET young people) or provided a re-connection with learning (in particular for some adults who had been out of work).

Much of the formal learning work undertaken within Access to Nature was 'entry' level activity, designed to offer challenging but achievable pathways for learners. This approach led to projects choosing learning routes and awards and qualifications carefully in order to offer learners a range of opportunities.

This approach was extremely productive. In addition to gaining qualifications, it stimulated new ambitions amongst many learners and a desire for further involvement with the natural environment. In this way, the programme provided a 'stepping stone' for many people.

The most common formal route used within Access to Nature was the John Muir Award, an environmental award scheme that encourages awareness and responsibility for the natural environment, and which guides learners through four challenges: discovery, exploration, conservation and sharing¹⁹. The structure of the award, coupled with the opportunities for learning and access to natural places provided through Access to Nature, was a highly effective combination, with over 2,542 individuals achieving a John Muir Award through Access to Nature (see Appendix 4).

It is also the case that Access to Nature had a particular learning impact for many school children. A significant number of projects worked alongside schools (Primary and Secondary schools), children's centres and colleges to encourage and enable outdoor learning. In addition to stimulating an interest in nature and offering children the chance to discover new skills and places to play, projects noted how their work in these settings also impacted on the quality of mainstream education experienced by children. For example, there is evidence that teachers used opportunities for outdoor learning to enhance the delivery of the curriculum for children and young people and that this enabled them to be more successful in their studies.

Footnote 19 See www.jmt.org

The **Green Volunteering project in Scotswood** (*Scotswood Natural Community Garden, Newcastle*) provided practical learning opportunities in outdoor skills for the long-term unemployed. The majority of these opportunities were in-house short courses, although five volunteers were also supported to gain National Diplomas in Horticulture. For three men, this led to significant impacts, as well as creating great benefits for the project. One of the three volunteers, Eddy, recalls his involvement:

"I heard about the garden from a friend. He knew I'd been made redundant and that I had an interest in gardening. I soon found myself volunteering about 2-3 days a week. The project suggested I could look at a horticultural course at a local Newcastle college. I was a bit apprehensive at first, having not done well at school, but signed up for a two year diploma. It's probably the best decision I have ever made. We continued to learn new skills at the project, such as willow weaving and bee-keeping. During the course, I learnt about permaculture and signed up for another course in permaculture design. I'm now a qualified permaculture designer, and am putting the skills to good use in the community garden and on several community projects. Along with Rob and Chris (two other volunteers), I've now set up a new co-operative business – Eco Gardening Solutions – so we are now self-employed gardeners."

The three volunteers re-designed the permaculture growing area at the project, helping it to become a Learning and Network Demonstration site for permaculture; used their new skills to design and build a new garden at a local community site; and have given basic training in permaculture to other volunteers.

People gained skills and confidence to help others to learn about nature

"The project has had a positive impact on how staff structure learning opportunities and broadened their skills and knowledge. This has a direct benefit on what is offered to pupils and has provided us with the chance to expand our curriculum and allow pupils to experience new ways of learning."

Wild at Heart, Groundwork Cheshire

Access to Nature enabled many practitioners from a range of backgrounds to acquire the skills, knowledge and confidence to deliver outdoor learning and practical engagement activity themselves. Staff in schools, children's centres and youth and community organisations benefitted particularly from working alongside projects.

Developing a legacy of practice, and embedding skills and approaches alongside partner organisations, is a notable success of the programme. For teachers and education workers especially, Access to Nature had a significant impact. The provision of Continuing Professional Development and other training boosted confidence, allowed teachers to work through concerns and anxieties about outdoor learning related to health and safety and relevance to the curriculum, and gave teachers the chance to try out new learning techniques alongside experienced outdoor practitioners. Crucially, the programme enabled teachers to see the benefits for children and young people, and instil an enthusiasm for learning in the outdoors.

This pattern of building sustainability through learning and confidence building also extended to community settings and social housing providers. Group leaders, community officers and youth workers have acquired knowledge of how to access and make good use of local green spaces, and gained the confidence to run their own sessions for local people, families and children.

Natural Estates (*London Wildlife Trust*) was a multi-partner project and involved eight social landlords and Groundwork London. The project aimed to enhance the biodiversity and ecological value of the open spaces surrounding social housing estates through two strands of work – a resident engagement programme of environmental activities and a capacity building and skills training programme for social landlord staff, green space managers and their contractors.

After undertaking an extensive skills audit across the partner organisations, Groundwork London developed a series of seminars that covered subjects such as ‘effective resident involvement’, ‘funding and resourcing’ and ‘designing sustainable green space’ which were all very well received by the social housing providers.

The indications are that the capacity building programme will have a long-term impact within the social housing sector. All of the learning resources were collated and drawn together into a toolkit and the presentations, case study material, publications and templates were made available to all the housing providers. Groundwork London also submitted a revised shorter version of the programme for LANTRA accreditation so that the housing sector can continue to develop their skills and capacity in green space management. Following suggestions made at the final seminar, a new self-sustained network of housing providers has been launched to pursue opportunities to share learning and best practice in matters relating to green space management.

6

Section six:

Outcome 3

More people able to enjoy the natural environment through investment in access to natural places and networks between sites



6. Outcome 3

More people able to enjoy the natural environment through investment in access to natural places and networks between sites

“There has really been an improvement with the community in how they think about and use the space. Now pushchairs can access the woods. There are more activities going on and more regular attenders who then spread the word. People are now respecting where I live.”

Fryston Woods Access and Improvement Project, Castleford Heritage Trust

6.1 The number of places where access was improved

Programme Target	Investment in access links and associated networks to 130 natural places by 2014	325,000 people (excluding volunteers) experiencing better links with the natural environment by 2014
Final Target Numbers	Investment was made in 2,793 natural places and associated networks	656,661 people experienced better links with the natural environment

6.2 How access to local natural places was improved

Access to Nature invested funding in over 2,800 natural places over the life of the programme. This investment was complemented by a huge volume of time and skill from project participants and volunteers, who used the skills they learnt through the programme to improve access for themselves, their families, their friends and neighbours.

The combination of well-targeted money, professional input where needed, and local labour helped ensure local sites became more visible, better understood, easier to travel around and navigate, and, crucially, better used.

A feature of Access to Nature was the virtuous circle of involvement and how this benefitted people and places: people became involved, enjoyed their time in natural places, learnt new things about those places and how to care for them, helped out practically by improving sites and access, told others about those improvements, all leading to more people becoming involved.

6.3 Project achievements

More people have become aware of, and are accessing, local green spaces

Projects achieved access improvements through two key activities – making physical changes to sites, and promoting those changes through a range of information resources. New interpretation boards, artworks, maps, trail guides, signage, leaflets, press articles, websites and social media pages all played a part in notifying local people about the changes that were being made to their local sites. These improvements took many forms and included new entrance ways, paths, boardwalks, trails, steps, bridges, fences, gates and platforms for fishing and pond dipping. This work opened up many sites to new users, widening the volume of people able to discover the natural world around them.

Making the most of natural spaces **Outer Space** (*The Centre for Sustainable Healthcare*) used partnerships with local community groups, health charities, environmental organisations and the NHS to develop new access to green spaces within the grounds of two NHS hospitals in Coventry and Doncaster. They opened up these resources for patients and staff at the sites, and for nearby residents and groups wanting access to a local natural place.

New pathways, signage, benches, bridges, steps and a pond dipping platform were created to improve usage of a mature woodland adjoining the hospital buildings in Doncaster, and a wetland site bordering the River Sowe in Coventry.

Usage of the newly accessible natural places has been good; the NHS managers of the Doncaster site estimated that 70% of the 24,000 people using the site each year accessed the woodland walks, and user feedback suggests that the green spaces close to hospitals provided distinct benefits.

“It’s a really nice quiet place to think about your life and your loved ones.”

Cancer Care Group member, Coventry

“As a member of staff the site helps me get away when it is hot and busy. I can get out to a peaceful environment. Getting out into the fresh air is helpful to me.”

Staff member, Coventry

“The footpaths keep the area well used which helps reduce anti-social behaviour, making it a nice place for the locals.”

Local resident, Doncaster

“I quite often see nurses pushing patients in wheelchairs around the paths and stopping to look through the trees. We’ve created outdoor spaces that can be used for all sorts of activities, such as story telling with school kids and woodland folklore with adults.”

Project staff member

People with particular access needs have been able to connect with local nature for the first time

While access has improved for all who visit local natural places, the programme brought special benefits for those whose circumstances would usually restrict access, in particular wheelchair users and people with disabilities, older people, people who are infirm or who have health difficulties, parents with young children who use buggies, and cyclists. New access improvements opened up the potential for these groups to access natural places in many settings.

Access to Nature in Leeds (*The Conservation Volunteers*) recruited and supported volunteers with minimal previous experience of the natural environment. Among their substantial pool of volunteers were people who were unemployed or from low income families, from BME communities, physically disabled or with learning impairments.

In total, 6,056 volunteer workdays were dedicated to improving the quality of 20 sites in Leeds. Their contributions were varied and included footpath and access work, hedge-laying, willow coppicing, pond, woodland, grassland and vegetation management, horticulture and community garden work.

The Parks and Countryside service from Leeds City Council commented on the access improvements on one site:

“The woodland is more accessible to the public, paths and cycle routes have been cleared, allowing informal recreation and wildlife encounters. It has also improved access for guided walks through the woodland by the countryside rangers, and conservation officers. This woodland is used every Autumn for fungus forays for the general public, and is now a more useful resource for visiting school groups and community engagement.”

Improved access and usage has helped some sites to become safer places

As sites became easier to access, more visible, better used and more widely owned by local communities, a number of projects reported decreased rates of littering, vandalism and fly-tipping.

7

Section seven:

Outcome 4

Richer, more sustainably managed natural places meeting the needs of communities



7. Outcome 4

Richer, more sustainably managed natural places meeting the needs of communities

“Over the last few years I’ve seen the woods transformed from a piece of land plagued by flooding and used mainly as a dumping ground for burnt out cars and fly-tipping into a wonderful communal woodland which I and many others now use and enjoy.”

Setting the Scene for Nature, Community Forest Trust, Liverpool and Manchester

7.1 The number of places that were improved

Programme Target	Investment in the quality of 100 natural places to better meet the needs of local people and wildlife	250,000 people (excluding volunteers) benefitting from physical improvements to their local natural environment	5,000 volunteers regularly participating in the care of these natural places over the lifetime of the programme
Final Target Numbers	Investment was made in the quality of 2,472 natural places	811,838 people benefitted from physical improvements to sites	35,487 volunteers became regular participants in the care of natural places

7.2 How the quality of local natural places was improved

Access to Nature prompted many local groups to think carefully about how their local natural places could be improved for the benefit of wildlife, plant life and people. The programme led to thoughtful adjustments to the layout and structure of over 2,500 green spaces across England.

The improvements made to natural places were designed to re-shape, re-balance and create thriving settings and habitats, and to enable a greater biodiversity to develop. As with much of the work undertaken to improve access, plans to improve and maintain the quality of sites provided opportunities for local people and volunteers to play an active part in making change happen. A substantial number of the remedial and creative changes on many sites were achieved by the hard work of local people.

Making a positive contribution to the quality of sites connected well with the other aspirations of the programme, offering local people the chance to learn about the conservation and management of natural places, use practical skills to make changes happen, and build the sense of connection crucial to developing ownership and commitment in the long term.

7.3 Project achievements

For many sites, the process of improving quality meant remedial work to remove litter or graffiti, tackle invasive plant species or re-claim areas which had become wild or inaccessible. Once cleaned and accessible, sites were improved in a number of ways, the most common of which was the planting or introduction of new plants and trees, and the creation of new habitats. Other common improvements within Access to Nature were the shaping and coppicing of trees and woods, and the creation of new ponds, meadows, grasslands and orchards.

The **Wyke Beck Valley Pride** (*Leeds City Council*) aimed to improve the access to and quality of the natural environment of the Wyke Beck in north Leeds, particularly for disadvantaged communities living close by. As well as involving 950 local people in practical tasks up and down the valley, the project hosted almost 400 employees on corporate volunteering activities. The collective effort of local people and corporate volunteers contributed to major improvements to the Wyke Beck valley. Amongst these improvements were: 9 new entrance features, 7 information boards, 2,700m of improved footpaths, 120m of new fencing, 50 habitat improvements and the installation of 1 bridge. There were a total of 60 litter and vegetation clean ups, and 25,000 bulbs, 5,000 trees and a sack full of wildflower seeds were planted.

The following comments from two corporate volunteers highlight what they gained from their experiences:

"I think we managed to do quite a lot of work. Of course there is always something more that can be done but we put a lot of efforts in and managed to clean a significant area of the park for the time we had. My perceptions of the area have changed following my time at Wyke Beck Valley Pride. Now I know more about the park and how much effort is required to clean the mess we create."

Leeds University Business School volunteer

"Being able to work with a community project is rewarding. I didn't know this place existed. It will be a really nice place to visit in the summer."

Asda volunteer

Natural places are cleaner

Removing litter (and more substantial items including sofas, fridges, bikes and shopping trolleys) was a necessary task for a number of Access to Nature projects. It also became another means of engaging and involving local people, and a variety of creative approaches, such as competitions, Litter Champions projects in schools and towpath tidies have led to cleaner rivers, canals, beaches and woodlands. Removing litter contributed to local people's sense of civic pride, and provided a means for people with limited time to make a meaningful contribution.

Play on the Wildside (*Bulwell Toy Library, Nottingham*) found a novel way of encouraging family participation in litter collection in the local Woodland. They replaced an annual Easter Egg Hunt with a litter hunt, with children being rewarded with eggs when they collected litter – the more they collected, the more chocolate eggs they would get! The Rubbish Egg Hunt was born.

The first Rubbish Egg Hunt involved over 20 children and adults and collected over 50 bags of rubbish. A repeat event a year later as part of a family Spring celebration focused on a local park and successfully involved around 10 families.

Natural places are better managed

A consequence of improving quality at local natural places was an increased interest in what happens to sites once they have been improved. The strong emphasis within Access to Nature on encouraging on-going involvement and ownership took a number of forms, the most common of which was the formation of 'Friends Of' groups or similar collections of people who have come together to think about how a site might be managed or cared for. A number of these groups began to take on more formal roles, entering into dialogue with local authorities or other landowners, and helping to develop, and play a role in implementing Management Plans or Action Plans.

Telford Access to Nature (*Severn Gorge Trust*) developed and supported a total of 16 Friends Of groups linked to local green spaces around the district as well as the Telford Green Spaces Partnership, which brought the groups together. The Partnership worked with member groups to identify four initial sites where there felt to be potential to create new Management Plans in partnership with the local authority.

The process of developing the plans involved the groups in gathering data, interpreting this using a computer management system, and developing plans for future actions. The process boosted the groups' confidence in their roles, their capacity to make decisions and to work with the Council. The groups each assumed a prominent role in a partnership approach to site management set out in the plans agreed with the Council.

The work also generated a willingness on behalf of the Partnership to look at planning on a wider scale, and this has led to dialogue with the Council on borough wide green infrastructure planning.

Habitats have been created and biodiversity enhanced

“On the Lissington and Longmore estate we have assisted with wild meadow planting and have surveyed much of the site for birds and invertebrates. The artificial pond we have introduced supports the three common amphibian species ... and we have at least one dragonfly record for the site. Invertebrates are regularly recorded by school and children’s groups, as are birds.”

Wild London Inclusive London, London Wildlife Trust

Many of the changes made to local natural spaces benefitted the range of plants and animals within those natural places. Better cared for and better-managed settings are likely to deliver greater diversity. It is likely that the impact of Access to Nature on habitat improvement and biodiversity has been under-reported, partly as a result of projects noting only those habitats clearly identified as such. In addition, it is likely that new habitats have been created through the ordinary work to manage sites, but that these have not been named as actual ‘habitat improvements’. Also, biodiversity gains can take time to be observed, although a number of projects have implemented monitoring activities.

The volume of site improvements made, planting and seeding accomplished in the programme, and the number of project evaluation reports illustrating the benefits of new habitats for wildlife, suggest the programme brought about gains in biodiversity which will be fully realised by local people as they move beyond the life of the programme itself.

Living Churchyard <i>Holy Trinity Church, Wolverhampton</i>	Created a new wildflower meadow in the church grounds. A biodiversity survey one year on found over 50 tree and plant species, 21 breeds of bird, 3 mammals and 29 species of insect.
Sowe Valley <i>Warwickshire Wildlife Trust</i>	After otter holts were installed on the River Sowe there were sightings of more otters further north along the river than had previously been recorded.
Wild:Life <i>North Warwickshire Borough Council</i>	Established four new Local Nature Reserves in North Warwickshire, involving local people in habitat surveys, bioblitzes ²⁰ and species monitoring. The changes to habitats will produce biodiversity gains as the new reserves develop. A further six new Local Nature reserves were created by projects in Nottingham and Bolton.
See Green <i>Torbay Coast and Countryside Trust</i>	Marine surveys have been conducted to monitor species and habitats in the sea grass beds.
Access to West London's Nature <i>Groundwork London</i>	Small habitat improvement activities carried out by the project (pond building, wildflower meadows, log piles, hibernacula) generated reports of biodiversity gains, including increased range for lizards and nest boxes being used by birds.

People have become volunteers and are actively caring for local natural places

In drawing local people into activities in green spaces close to where they live, and in offering chances to learn and in providing practical and achievable tasks, Access to Nature has opened the door for many to become volunteers and offer time and commitment to nature in their communities.

While for some, this has meant a one-off or occasional involvement, for others it has been the start of a regular participation in caring for natural places, or, in some instances, a step on the road to further learning or paid work. The programme exceeded its target figure for regular volunteers by nearly seven fold, suggesting Access to Nature has found a new and effective way of connecting people with nature, and created an enthused body of people across England who see nature as of significant value to them and their neighbours.

Where projects have explored the reasons people have volunteered, the responses point to a relatively simple formula for success: volunteers value the chance to make a difference, and gain a sense of pride in what they achieve and contribute; they enjoy working with others from their communities within teams with shared aims; they value the chance to learn; and there is a strong sense of belief in what they are doing.

More information about the input of volunteers to Access to Nature projects is included in section 8 of this paper.

Footnote 20 A "BioBlitz" is an outdoor, family event where expert naturalists and members of the public work together to do a fast and intensive survey of all forms of life in a natural space. It's a race to find as many different species of plants, birds, insects, fungi, mammals, fish, and everything else as possible in 24 hours. Everything found is written down to make a 'species record' which feeds into national databases that monitor our wildlife - citizen science in action.

8

Section eight:

Outcome 5

An increase in communities' sense of ownership of local natural places, by establishing strong partnerships between communities, voluntary organisations, local authorities and others



8. Outcome 5

An increase in communities’ sense of ownership of local natural places, by establishing strong partnerships between communities, voluntary organisations, local authorities and others

“Telling people they need to care for their local sites is not enough. They have to learn by doing it for themselves.”

Wildlife in the City, Nottingham Wildlife Trust

8.1 The number of projects engaging positively and actively with communities

Programme Target	100% of projects actively and positively engaging with local communities
Final Target Numbers	100% of projects have actively and positively engaged with local communities

8.2 How projects created a sense of ownership

“Turning people from one off beneficiaries of an activity into regular volunteers is generally a lengthy and, at times, difficult process. It involves, amongst other things, establishing a relationship and rapport with individuals, developing trust and nurturing their interest without making demands. This needs an investment of staff time and must be consistent and on-going to be successful; sporadic contacts or a series of one offs is not enough to establish a relationship.”

Habitat, CSV, Ipswich

Access to Nature repeatedly demonstrated that *ownership* is not an automatic by-product of *engagement* with the natural environment²¹. First time encounters, however positive, were not in themselves sufficient to fundamentally change the way people feel about, think about, or use the natural environment. The evidence has shown that for people to value their natural environment, to respect nature and give their time to improve or conserve green spaces, or if they are to inspire others to access the outdoors, then there is a need to create opportunities for active and meaningful engagement. Although these routes to ownership can take many forms, there are some clear indications from Access to Nature of what has worked well. Four themes, in particular, have been dominant across the programme: using a stepping stones approach; working in an empowering way; engaging people in projects they care about; and building the infrastructure.

A stepping stones approach

“The project was set up so that participants could work through progressive stages, increasing their confidence and experience along the way, whilst allowing them to stop when they feel comfortable.”

Walk on the Wildside, Hampshire County Council

The analogy of ‘stepping stones’ was used by a number of organisations to describe the gradual, incremental process of building relationships with the natural environment. There are different ways in which this was achieved.

Footnote 21 Further information about how Access to Nature projects created ownership is summarised in the following Learning Paper:
Icarus (2013) *A Sense of Ownership – Fostering a change in the relationship between people and the natural environment*. UK: Natural England.
See <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/>

<p><i>Starting local and then venturing further afield</i></p>	<p>Walk on the Wildside, Castle Cavendish Foundation</p> <p>The project developed an approach to building ownership that began close to home. They started by delivering a range of doorstep activities, such as bulb planting in the local library or making bird feeders at the after school club, which raised the profile of the project and created the space for relationships to develop with the project team. As the project workers came to understand the specific barriers that prevented people from engaging more fully with their natural environment, they were able to offer them tailored trips to parks, nature reserves, farms and other green spaces. Eventually, overall responsibility for planning and delivering activities was handed over to groups.</p>
<p><i>Starting further afield and then exploring local green spaces</i></p>	<p>Hastings Wild Things (RSPCA) and Faith Woodlands Communities (Luton Council of Faiths)</p> <p>Both projects created opportunities for people to visit and experience woodland sites that were 'out of the way'. In the woodlands they were able to address peoples fears and offer them safe and sensitively managed opportunities to engage with nature. As groups became more accustomed to spending time in nature, the projects shifted their attention to local green spaces, using a mixture of approaches to encourage people to access spaces on their doorstep.</p>
<p><i>Providing 'take home' resources</i></p>	<p>Let Nature Feed Your Senses, LEAF / Sensory Trust</p> <p>Farm hosts provided resources for their visiting groups (including schools and people from care homes) with resources to take home that would continue to grow their interest in the natural world. As well as materials that the groups created during their visits, many also went away with seeds and seedlings.</p>
<p><i>From bite-sized learning to longer workshops</i></p>	<p>Wild Norfolk, Norfolk Wildlife Trust</p> <p>The project wanted people to enjoy their countryside experience, learn something new and be inspired to continue to learn more and help in the conservation of local wildlife. After talking to residents in their target areas they realised that experiencing something new could be very intimidating. Rather than offering 150 wildlife adult workshops as they originally intended, they adopted a stepping stones approach which offered people short 1-hour tasters which could be followed up by longer 5-hour workshops.</p>
<p><i>Offering progression routes that enable people to build their skills and confidence over time</i></p>	<p>Change of Scene, Northampton Borough Council</p> <p>Designed four successive strands of activity that enabled young people to progress from after school taster sessions to a 24 week youth work and sports leadership programme.</p>

There are some features of these stepping stone models that have been critical to their success.

- Consistency of staff ensured that trusting relationships could develop.
- They were well paced, giving people sufficient time and the right kinds of activities to allow relationships with the project to develop.
- They entailed a gradual shift in the power dynamic so that responsibility moved over time from project officers to the volunteers and groups.

An empowering approach with volunteers

“We encouraged volunteers to attend training that they could benefit from and use within the arena of conservation and community work.”

Habitat, CSV, Ipswich

Project staff funded through Access to Nature played a critical role in creating opportunities for people to experience and interact with their natural environment and they provided much needed encouragement and support to sustain this engagement. There is however a risk that long-term continuous input from a project officer hinders the ability of people to instigate and deliver activities on their own. Determined to avoid this, many organisations sought to work with people and groups in an empowering way.

At the heart of volunteer empowerment was the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. The training of volunteers was both formal (via accredited training courses) and informal (site-based ‘learning through doing’) and covered a vast breadth of skills from all aspects of practical conservation through to film-making, event management and first aid. Volunteers were also signposted to other groups and organisations so that they could further develop and utilise their skills, and some were encouraged to take on roles as natural environment ‘ambassadors’ or ‘champions’ so that could motivate and inspire others.

The approach of **Wild London Inclusive London** (*London Wildlife Trust*) was to enable and empower people to get involved in conservation activities in their own neighbourhoods without relying on London Wildlife Trust’s continued supervision and direct involvement. 44 people were trained and supported to take on champion roles across the project. At the end of the project there was much optimism that the champions had the skills, resources and motivation to continue their work.

- 37 people were still active in a variety of roles and activities.
- 28 were playing leading roles in the management of their community green space or independently running educational / volunteering sessions.
- 12 had taken on advocacy roles at a range of public events.
- 5 had found paid employment in a related field.

An empowering approach with groups

“Three years is a relatively short time to generate a Friends Of group. It is well documented that such groups take time, energy and a common purpose to form and function well. Often such groups are born out of a threat to a community asset or an issue that people want to tackle. In this instance there was no ‘fight’ and no immediate interest group which meant it needed a significant amount of time and energy to develop a group.”

Sowe Valley Project, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust

The empowerment of groups was a focus for much Access to Nature activity. Some organisations set out with the intention of creating new Friends Of groups but encountered difficulties which made their targets hard to achieve. Reflecting on this, they have pointed to the complex and challenging lives of their target groups and argued that their ambitions were too high given the timescales they were working within. Some have discovered that the notion of forming a conservation group is culturally alien to some people. As one organisation put it, *“The idea of a ‘voluntary group’ is not culturally relevant to some BME communities, driven as it is by UK centric idea of conservation volunteering. It is more likely that groups would be interested in voluntary activity in the countryside, but doing this from their own community organisations and structures.”*

Walk on the Wildside, Hampshire County Council

Some of the best examples of group empowerment stemmed from activities that targeted pre-existing groups, where the focus was on building the knowledge, networks and relationships that already existed. In these cases, it was a bespoke and flexible approach that was key to empowerment. Groups had access to specialist skills training; they benefitted from opportunities to meet and connect with other groups; and they were offered new resources to enhance their work.

Wild Norfolk (*Norfolk Wildlife Trust*) did not look to create new community groups to help look after green spaces. Instead they worked with existing groups tailor making sessions to help them manage their green spaces. This work included the following activities.

- Showing a beach cleaning group how to carry out a strandline survey.
- Teaching a woodland community group how to identify trees.
- Showing a Friends group how to run a plant survey.
- Helping a community garden build bat and bird boxes.
- Teaching a local park group how to create a willow seating area.

“We worked hard to develop a working relationship with local community groups, supporting them in their project and encouraging them to learn more about how they could actively improve their sites for wildlife.”

Project evaluation report

New groups also evolved over the lifetime of Access to Nature as people, who were initially engaged as volunteers, were encouraged to come together and form a shared interest group. Where this happened, project officers and partner organisations sought to build skills and capacity so that they could have a long future after Access to Nature.

There is Space Here (*Wiltshire Wildlife Trust*) worked closely with volunteers to create a community Wildlife Watch group in Netheravon. Project staff worked for six months with the parent volunteers, supporting them with session planning, resourcing, delivery and evaluation. The group is now in a strong position to continue.

Wildlife in the City (*Nottingham Wildlife Trust*) initially hoped that the project would be able to establish up to five new 'Friends Of' groups (FOGs). However, the team found this to be very difficult in its traditional form, as the sites without FOGs were detached in some way from the local community. The team decided instead to focus on creating ownership in different ways, starting with developing enthusiastic local volunteers. One particular group of volunteers from Bulwell were keen to give back to their local area so they were supported to form a 'quasi-friends of' group for the whole of the Bulwell area. Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust have had to rethink their assumptions about what motivates people to be part of a conservation group.

"They appeared to be passionate about their area first, and interested in wildlife second, a different type of volunteer for Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust."

Project evaluation report

Engaging people in projects that they care about

"Working with the project has allowed me a real feeling of ownership and involvement, and a deep feeling of satisfaction that I am helping to make such a visible improvement to the Valley."

Sowe Valley, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust

Encouraging people to feel a sense of ownership towards the natural environment can be challenging when there are no green spaces in their area or their local sites are neglected, in poor condition and associated with anti-social behaviour. Access to Nature has demonstrated that negative perceptions can be addressed through small-scale easily identifiable improvements. Furthermore, there is much evidence to show that one of the most powerful ways to change people's attitudes has been to get them involved in projects that improve local sites or create new habitats. Features of this approach that have been critical are as follows.

- *Engaging local people* in the design of projects from the outset.
- Involving local people in *developing the original funding application*.
- Focusing efforts on *visible improvements*.
- Providing *multiple and prolonged opportunities* for people to get involved so that they can develop a relationship with each other and their local green spaces.
- *Tapping into the enthusiasm* of a few people and building from there.
- Creating opportunities to *showcase and celebrate* improvements to engender a sense of pride.

“Lots of people will think this is a good idea but when it comes to it, they won’t have time to get involved”.

“Make sure you will somehow secure these hanging baskets, otherwise they’ll be nicked”.

These are just some of the comments that Project Officers from **Natural Estates** (London Wildlife Trust) received when they talked to residents about improving green spaces on the estates. They found that some people were supportive of the idea of doing things but couldn’t see themselves getting involved; some were sceptical that any intervention or activity would last; and some had concerns about mixing or working alongside others. The Project Officers’ response was to identify a core group of local people who were keen to get involved and empower them to play a lead role in the practical care of green spaces on their estate. In practice this entailed a very sensitive approach.

“Rather than making every volunteering activity a high profile event, the intention was to make this kind of participation an every day occurrence. Slowly it has become part of the lives of a small number of residents who are demonstrating to themselves, their neighbours and their landlords what can be done.”

Project evaluation report

Building the infrastructure

“Schools love the opportunity to use our nature reserves but teachers don’t have the confidence to take children out themselves. In order to ensure that this approach is sustained, we need to give these teachers the training and confidence to deliver outdoors activities without being accompanied by a member of the Wildlife Trust staff.”

The Great Outdoors Project, The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire

By working together, groups and organisations were able to access the information, expertise and resources that they needed to reach people and engage them in the natural environment. The partnerships and collaborations that have been harnessed through Access to Nature were therefore a critical feature of the programme’s legacy and there have been notable achievements in this respect.

- *Many non-environmental organisations formed links with wildlife / conservation sites and groups, and are now well-placed to provide on-going opportunities for their members to engage with the natural environment.*
- *People who are passionate about the natural environment are now better connected. Some connected through practical activities on sites and went on to form new groups; others linked up through joint training events or workshops.*
- *Information sharing is easier because of new websites and the use of social networking opportunities developed by Access to Nature projects.*
- *Improved governance structures, new management plans, better volunteer management policies are amongst the capacity improvements that ensure groups are well placed to remain active and effective after Access to Nature.*
- *Legacy materials (website, workbooks, good practice guides etc.) have been created and disseminated through networks.*

Wildways (South Gloucestershire Council) raised the profile of green space and the importance of using the outdoors internally within the local authority. One of the biggest outputs and benefits arising from the seminars the project ran towards its conclusion is that the team has been included in some key consultations and decision making that it had previously been left out of. 81% of people from the seminars said they would try to champion green space.

“A realisation has dawned that working on green spaces is often very cost effective and very positive and rewarding for a neighbourhood.”

Project evaluation report

8.3 Project achievements

“I’m going to sprinkle dust around the trees, then they will stay healthy and none of them will ever die.”

Project participant, Early Learning in Nature, Sightlines, Newcastle

All funded Access to Nature projects were expected to contribute towards this outcome, and initially Natural England envisaged that this would require ‘stronger partnership working between communities, voluntary organisations, local authorities and others’. Despite this early focus on partnerships, the activity and changes associated with this outcome have taken many different forms, thus enabling a very rich legacy of learning to emerge from the work²².

A ‘sense of ownership’ concerns the relationships that people develop with their natural environment. These relationships take time to emerge. They require organisations to work in new and different ways so people with little previous experience of their natural environment are empowered to overcome practical and psychological barriers, and embrace the benefits associated with being outdoors. Not all organisations funded by Access to Nature succeeded in their efforts to build a sense of ownership. Some underestimated the time or resources that this work required; others lacked the experience, skills or partnerships to work in a different way. Nevertheless, across the programme, significant accomplishments were reported, most notably in how people, groups and communities value and care about their natural environment.

Footnote 22 Further information about how partnership working was a part of Access to Nature projects is summarised in the following Learning Paper:
Icarus (2011) *Making Partnerships Work – Partnerships at the heart of Access to Nature projects*. UK: Natural England.
See <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/>

Respect for the natural environment

There have been many reports by projects of a growing interest in and respect for the natural environment, particularly amongst children and young people. People are more curious and want to learn more about the natural environment; they are more aware of behaviours that are harmful to the environment; and they are more open to spending time outdoors and are keen to encourage others to do the same.

Early Learning in Nature (*Sightlines*) in Newcastle provided early years children aged 3–5 with the chance to explore and have fun in woodlands, and to learn about themselves and the natural environment of the woods. Using play, learning by doing and art activities, the project prompted children to use their imaginations to discover and interpret the woodland setting. The evidence from the work identified themes of understanding and care in how children viewed the woods and the creatures and plants that live there. Children were observed looking after trees and animals, describing the changes through the seasons and what this meant for the wildlife and plants; identifying, naming and befriending trees; and creating stories about the world they observed and imagined. Common themes were a sense of care, empathy and guardianship for the woods and the creatures and plants that lived there.

“(The children) have developed a respect for nature and confidence unimaginable six months ago.”

Early Years Teacher

“(The children) project emotions onto the trees and feel emotional connections with the trees, especially those that they see as ‘sad’ or ‘poorly’”.

Primary School Teacher

Connection with the natural environment

“I never thought I’d get into the allotment...and everything that goes with the lifestyle of working on an allotment – the planting, making the beds, everything. The stuff you plant, you get kind of protective of all the things you’ve made happen. It’s good to see things grow, to see how things progress.”

Rupert’s Wood, Student Community Action, Newcastle

People involved in physical improvements reported a closer connection with the sites they worked on; children and young people are returning to sites with their families to ‘show them around’; volunteers are committed to the on-going management of sites; communities are discouraging and reporting behaviours that are damaging such as littering, fly tipping or vandalism.

Working across over 20 sites in the Black Country, the **Black Country Living Landscape** project (*Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country*) used practical volunteering activities such as work parties, litter picks, and projects with local schools and community groups, to improve sites and encourage involvement and ownership. One impact of this style of work was the emergence of a sense of pride and responsibility from local people, sometimes expressed through the wish to form a 'Friends Of' group for a site, and sometimes through what the project described as 'self-policing' – local people supporting each to use sites more and discourage misuse.

"Our problem... was to try and persuade adults to stop using the brook as the local tip. This has stopped now. I think a lot of this is because the children know where their own bird boxes are, and where they've planted bulbs. They bring adults down and show them and hope that it will encourage them not to dump but to realise they've got a real treasure and to look after it."

Warley Woods Community Trust

"Previously the copse was knocked about and was abused and disused, whereas now it is quite the opposite. It's being used and the awareness is there. It has actually changed the perception of the site, people say it's a lovely place...there is a pride in the community for the site."

Hilton Hall Community Association member

Commitment to contributing to the natural environment

"There have been several participants (all previously NEET young people) who have been so inspired by the project that they have collectively clocked up thousands of hours of volunteering over the last 3 years, with one outstanding individual achieving over 450 hours!"

PUSHing Down the Barriers, Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust

Opportunities to appreciate and actively engage with green spaces engendered in some people an on-going commitment to contribute positively to the natural environment. Some volunteers, initially only engaged for a fixed period, extended their involvement with projects and became regular volunteers, independently working on sites or mentoring others. Others, inspired by their Access to Nature experiences, joined a different group so that they could continue to contribute to local conservation projects. Many new groups also emerged out of a commitment amongst local people to continue local conservation activities initiated by Access to Nature.

The Rowan Earth project (*Rowan Training and Enterprise CIC, South Yorkshire*) offered a six week programme of accredited practical conservation work to adults and young people who were having difficulties 'coping' with life: some were isolated due to illness; some were living on the fringes of mainstream life because they were carers, single parents or homeless. Embracing their new found skills and experience, 24 trainees got involved in the establishment of two new environmental action groups so that they could continue to be involved in nature conservation. One trainee, now a conservation volunteer, peer mentor and Ambassador for Rowan Earth, commented on the journey he had made

"Before I came on the Rowan programme I didn't know the difference between Environment and Conservation, I thought it was all the same thing. I didn't care about swatting bees, they meant nothing to me, I couldn't have told you the difference between one tree and another. But now I have so much respect for the natural environment and I would never swat a bee or any insect ever again! I even tell other people about nature conservation and I have done loads of web research and joined campaign groups on line."

Embracing the benefits of the natural environment

"The attitudes of the community leaders at Bedford Council of Faiths and Luton Council of Faiths are much more positive towards the environment and working in natural places. Both the project workers are now trained in bringing nature to life for a wide range of groups, and they will continue with this in their professional work and as volunteers."

Faith Woodlands Communities, Luton Council of Faiths

Schools, children's centres and a wide range of community organisations, from small user-led groups to a Faith Council, have embraced the many benefits that the natural environment offers. Teachers have adjusted their curriculum to accommodate more outdoor learning; community centres have created wildlife spaces for their members to nurture and maintain; and local groups have integrated visits to green spaces into their regular programme of activities. One of the striking features of this area of impact is that it concerns community-based organisations that have traditionally had little experience of engaging with the natural environment. As a result of Access to Nature, staff and volunteers working in these organisations have the knowledge, skills, confidence and, in many instances, the passion to motivate and inspire others to do things outdoors.

Having worked closely with children and families in the area for over 30 years, Bulwell Toy Library in urban Nottingham had observed how children did not go out into the local area and were wary of all things natural, despite parkland and woodland on their doorstep. They could see the impact of what has been described as ‘nature deficit disorder’ by Richard Louv²³ and launched their **Play on the Wildside** project. They offered play sessions in the natural environment, re-connecting children and families with the outdoors, increasing their understanding and respect for nature and its value as a play resource.

The impact of the project on local people was considerable – children and families had new, positive experiences in the natural environment; they enjoyed the freedom of playing outdoors; parents learnt about the activities they could do with their children; and everyone learnt about the natural environment.

But the impact on the Toy Library, its staff and volunteers was equally profound.

“One of the things that has emerged from the evaluation and going over all the day sheets and reports is how much everyone involved in the project experienced and learned about the natural world and the woods on our doorstep staff as well as volunteers, children and their families. I thought that I knew a reasonable amount of stuff about nature, having been brought up in the countryside, but the things I have seen and done for the first time I can’t even begin to count. It’s easy to pass on enthusiasm for the natural world when you’re just as amazed about what you’re seeing for the first time as the child you’re watching it with. In fact the impact on my life and my family through this project has been huge. It has changed the importance of nature for the whole of my family.”

Project Officer

Given the success of Play on the Wildside, the Toy Library has made a commitment to continue its work with children and families in the outdoors as a core activity. It also plans to turn the woodland into a Community Woodland, taking on responsibility for its management as well as ensuring its on-going role as a venue for their play activities.

Access to Nature gave the project the opportunity to work in a new kind of way, and most importantly, has had a fundamental impact on the organisation and the extent to which it will continue to offer children and young people the opportunity to engage with and benefit from their natural environment.

Footnote 23 Louv, R. 2009. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature Deficit Disorder*. London: Atlantic Books. This describes the negative consequences to individual health and the social fabric as children move indoors and away from physical contact with the natural world, particularly to indulge in unstructured and solitary experiences. Louv cites research pointing to attention disorders, obesity, a dampening of creativity, and depression as problems associated with nature deficient childhood.

9

Section nine:

A different way of working



9. A different way of working

9.1 New approaches

Access to Nature was about engaging people with little or no experience of the natural environment. The assessment of progress against the programme outcomes in the preceding sections of this paper demonstrates the impact Access to Nature had, and the extent to which it brought about the engagement of new audiences. To achieve these changes organisations had to develop ways of working that were responsive to the psychological and practical barriers that prevent people from benefitting from and contributing positively to their natural environment.

The more conventional methods of engaging people in the natural environment were re-thought. New types of organisations came on board, and new methods were trialled, often by staff with a different blend of skills to those that might be typically associated with environment-based work. Relationship building was at the core of much of this work; this took time and required resources to be employed in new ways and was enabled by the revenue funding focus of the programme. **Essentially, the consistent message through out this paper is that the programme was far less about convention and far more about adaptation, innovation and creativity.**

The table below contrasts, in fairly crude terms, the ways of working that characterised Access to Nature with more conventional approaches to engagement in the natural environment.

Table 2: Access to Nature engagement contrasted with traditional approaches in the environment sector

	Traditional environmental engagement projects	Access to Nature projects
Who is engaged	People who are interested in the natural environment / have previous experience of the natural environment	People with little or no previous experience of the natural environment
Organisations involved	Environment-focused organisations	Environment focused organisations PLUS community –based and beneficiary focused organisations
Delivery model	A single organisation, sometimes collaborating with other environment-focused organisations	Partnership and collaboration across a range of interests and specialisms
How people are engaged	Promotion of opportunities via websites, social networks, newsletters	Promotion of opportunities via word of mouth and intermediary bodies
Essential / core skills required by project staff / partners	Knowledge of the natural environment / practical skills	Ability to build relationships and nurture skills and confidence in others
Focus of the engagement activities	Determined by the organisation's priorities	Tailored to the interests and abilities of the people being engaged e.g. could be food, craft, games, fun, learning, practical activities
Typical sites where activities happen	Nature reserves, national parks, country parks, formal parks	Anywhere
Travelling to sites	People travel independently	Transport considerations are critical and often pre-arranged

Over 110 organisations and their partners played a significant role in the delivery of Access to Nature activities. These organisations varied considerably in size and focus yet despite this diversity, their experiences have revealed some common messages about the organisational conditions and relationships that are necessary for working with new kinds of beneficiary groups. Four main areas of learning have been identified through the evaluation process: organisational fit, skills, partnerships and the role of Natural England as enabler.

9.2 Organisational fit

“The Conservation Volunteers have been supporting people’s health, skills, education and social wellbeing through the natural environment for many years, and in Leeds we are practised at delivering conservation volunteering and environmental education. This has meant we were in the enviable management position of knowing which groups were most in need, who we could reach and where, how many people we could work with – and are known and trusted for our work.”

Access to Nature in Leeds, TCV

“The financial procedures and processes of the Borough Council caused problems throughout, as the project’s requirements challenged their normal practice.”

Local authority hosted project

The term ‘organisational fit’ describes the extent to which Access to Nature activities were informed by, complemented, added to and enhanced the work of the lead organisations. The evaluation process has shown that organisational fit has been a key factor in influencing the outcomes associated with Access to Nature activities.

- *Track record* – where lead organisations had prior knowledge and experience of working in a community, there were demonstrable benefits. These included: knowledge of the community’s infrastructure (community leaders, groups and networks) that the organisation can tap into efficiently; an understanding of the barriers to engagement that people experience so interventions could be designed to address barriers and tap into local interests; and the ability to build on the trust and rapport that was already well established.
- *Strategic fit* – where Access to Nature activities aligned with other strategic priorities, it brought benefits for delivery. For example, one local authority described how the strategic ‘backing’ by their organisation opened doors and gave the project direction and wider influence. Conversely, some organisations noted that association with a local authority was a barrier to engagement. Indeed, one team re-branded their project because they found that people were more open to working with them if they were not perceived to be ‘from the Council’.
- *Access to resources* – organisations varied in their ability to harness internal resources that could support project delivery. For example, some local authority staff reported benefits associated with being able to access skills, expertise and sometimes additional finance, from a broad range of disciplines across the organisation (for instance, nature conservation, children and young people, parks operations, green infrastructure, planning and transport). In other cases, smaller community and voluntary organisations that were not able to benefit from the same internal pool of skills / funding, tended to look to their partners to address gaps in skills or expertise and they sometimes accessed additional training.
- *Management support* – the attitudes of managers was, in some cases, critical to the success of Access to Nature activities. Some managers embraced the new approaches that Access to Nature projects trialled, for example by reconfiguring their teams to allow the methods to be better integrated or by ensuring that the learning was disseminated and acted upon. Other managers had very little direct input and some interventions suffered as a result.

9.3 A skilled workforce

“Our project staff have been fantastic and we have been able to recruit well in order to have the right skill set for the community engagement approach needed. This type of project needed a flexible and diverse skill set and we definitely had this from our members of staff.”

Where the Wild Things Grow, Cornwall Neighbourhoods for Change

Access to Nature demonstrated time and again that it is relationship building skills that are pivotal for successful engagement of the programme’s target groups. People need to feel welcomed, they need to enjoy their experience, and they need to feel safe to take risks and try out new experiences so that they grow in confidence. This is not to negate the value of environment / green space management skills but **the very clear message from this programme is that, on their own, environment-related skills are not sufficient to achieve sustained engagement.**

The revenue funding focus of Access to Nature gave projects scope to employ consistent worker/s for a prolonged period, and as a result they saw relationships grow. But relationship building was not just about a familiar face. Certain qualities and skills have been highlighted as important, particularly those that tend to be associated with community development / engagement.

- Having a *diverse skills* set.
- The ability to *relate to and build rapport* with a wide range of people.
- Being *reliable and trustworthy*.
- Understanding how to make activities *fun and inspiring*.
- Being able to work in an *encouraging, enabling and empowering* way with people.

Organisations that were more accustomed to working with people that are already ‘tuned in’ to environment matters had to evolve their routine style of working, develop and utilise new skills, or identify partners that could offer a complementary blend of skills / knowledge / expertise.

9.4 Partnerships

When it comes to engaging people unfamiliar with the natural environment, **a key message from Access to Nature is that going it alone is not always enough.** Barriers to engagement are complex and they can't always be overcome by one organisation alone, particularly when that organisation is new to an area or new to the people that are being engaged. Not only are partners important for overcoming barriers to engagement, they also bring significant added value, as discussed below.

Reaching people through partners

“Framing the project around lead organisations with extensive experience of working in the local community has been key to achieving engagement... However, this took time and resulted in a slower start to the project than anticipated. Once relationships were established, momentum increased with a rapid expansion of activities.”

Walk on the Wildside, Castle Cavendish Foundation, Nottingham

Appealing to people through open advertising was rarely effective. Instead, organisations worked with partners to ensure that the right people were targeted (for example, using links with health services to reach people that would benefit from exercise or using Youth Offending Teams to reach NEET young people). One of the main advantages of this approach was that partners were often a 'known face' - they were trusted and therefore better placed to encourage people to take part in new activities.

Wild Places (*Octopus Communities*) was delivered through four community centres in Islington. Intent on reaching a new audience for their activities, the community centres developed strong partnerships with many different local groups including a Kurdish and Middle Eastern women's organisation, children's centres, Action for children, Families First, a community learning centre, Family Outreach Support Services and Islington's Mental Health Champions Network.

Their interim evaluation revealed that they worked with many more women than men so they addressed this by promoting their activities to organisations such as St Mungo's and Elfrida who work with a higher proportion of men than women.

Drawing on partners' knowledge and relationships with target groups to ensure that activities are tailored to meet their needs

"By working together, staff from the RSPCA and service providers were able to overcome the fears that the young people had about coming here and ensure that they had plenty of time in advance of a visit to talk about their anxieties."

Hastings Wild Things, RSPCA

Partners were often selected because they knew the area and they knew the people projects wanted to work with. This meant they were in a good position to suggest which activities might appeal to the target beneficiaries, they could highlight particular concerns or needs that people might have, and they helped ensure these were addressed.

Partners as deliverers of activities

Not only did partners provide access to people and were a valuable source of information, they also played a direct role in the delivery of engagement activities, as illustrated in the following examples.

- Schools, colleges, youth groups, outdoor adventure organisations and environment charities have delivered training / education programmes.
- children's centres, community centres and social landlords, located in the heart of communities, have acted as hubs for the delivery of activities.
- Access to Nature activities have 'piggy backed' onto other community events organised by partners, such as fun days or celebrations.

Access to Nature in the North East through the John Muir award (*Durham County Council*) was delivered through a network of 40 providers. This enabled the project to be flexible and adaptable to meet the needs and interests of a wide range of learners. Working through providers became a highly effective methodology, with the number of providers trebling over the life of the project.

Connecting Naturally (*Earth Trust*) supported parents and young children in disadvantaged areas of Oxfordshire to get outdoors. It worked in partnership with 9 children's centres that were selected for a number of reasons.

- The children's centres were a ready-made 'hub' within local communities.
- The areas lacked natural green space and the children's centres had land that could be developed for play and recreation.
- The children's centres are part of a wider national network, so good practice blueprints could be widely disseminated.

Partners as providers of resources

“Our partners were critical to our access improvements. Our partners carried out physical works on a number of sites, provided dozens of volunteers and contributed match funding enabling major improvements to happen.”

Habitat, CSV, Ipswich

The resources that partners brought to Access to Nature were considerable and often difficult to quantify because partners were embedded in delivery. Nevertheless, it is evident that their contributions have taken many different forms, including the following.

- The *supply of volunteers* to carry out site improvements.
- The offer of *expert advice and support*, for example around mental health issues or substance abuse.
- The contribution of *matched funding* to enable physical access improvements to happen.
- Offering the *use of premises*, tools or equipment.

The key to good partnership working

The extensive partnership working across the programme has highlighted a number of critical success factors.

- Selecting partners for their *reputation / track record*.
- Developing relationships with *the right people* within partner organisations.
- *Investing time* in relationship building to develop and maintain partnerships.
- Developing a *mutually beneficial* relationship.
- Knowing and capitalising on *each other's strengths*.
- Maintaining *regular communication*.
- Joint planning of activities and *genuine collaboration*.
- A willingness from all partners to be *flexible*, review their input and adapt to the circumstances.

9.5 A tailored approach

“The resident engagement programme did not launch into a vacuum – each estate had its unique matrix of relationships amongst residents, its own culture of participation and its own set of opportunities. Project officers have discovered and navigated these conditions, adapting their approach and programmes of activity in response to the residents’ interests. There is no standard programme to apply – the activities delivered on each estate have been shaped by several iterations and continue to respond according to feedback.”

Connecting Naturally, Earth Trust, Oxfordshire

Engagement was tailored to overcome barriers and tap into the interests of different groups of people. There were many examples across the programme of how this happened.

- *Ensuring cultural sensitivity* for example by offering women only sessions; avoiding or designing activities around religious festivals; offering halal food; providing washing facilities and prayer space; culturally appropriate food; linking activities to cultural and faith traditions.
- *Bite size learning and offering different types of experience* to ensure that people remained engaged, something that was particularly important for NEETs.
- *Creating opportunities for people to shape and direct the activities* so that they formed a purposeful (rather than passive) relationship with the natural world.
- *Offering activities that people valued* for example offering accreditation if the target group perceived this to be important or providing activities that occupied children.
- *Adjusting the timing of activities to accommodate different groups*, for example offering activities in the afternoon for older people and activities for under 5s that fitted around nursery times.
- *Adjusting the group size* to accommodate preferences, for example ensuring a high ration of staff to participants if confidence levels are likely to be low.
- *Designing appropriate materials* for low literacy participants or people with language or communication difficulties.
- *Tapping into and building on people’s interests and concerns*, for example by reaching adults through their children or by working with well established groups and offering activities that add value to what they do already.

The **Young Carers Nature Challenge** (TCV, Dorset) reduced their group sizes and provided more direct supervision to meet the needs of young carers that were underperforming at school or displaying challenging behaviour. This enabled them to provide intensive supervision to build confidence and interpersonal skills. Where this was the case TCV reduced the group size and provided more direct supervision.

With almost half their participants housed in homeless hostels, **Wildlife Ambassadors** (*Froglife*) worked with some of the most vulnerable people living in Peterborough. In order to get the best from people they encouraged them to police their own behaviour with group rules tailored to their requirements. They also allowed the participants to choose activities to show them that they were trusted and their opinions respected. This went a long way in creating good relationships between project staff, volunteers and participants.

In addition, it was necessary to overcome the practical barriers that get in the way of people accessing the natural environment. On the whole, these barriers were well anticipated by organisations, and strategies were developed early on to ensure that they were addressed.

Transport

“BME communities don’t necessarily lack the interest or the will to get involved in the countryside but they experience practical barriers that stop them participating. Transport is the key barrier in this respect and the project helped address this... The ability to provide transport was a key factor in getting over 2,500 people from BME communities more engaged in the countryside. The communities themselves appear to have really appreciated the simplicity and directness of this approach.”

Walk on the Wildside, Hampshire County Council

Where access to transport was necessary to visit sites, organisations hired minibuses, rented vehicles, paid for school transport and even used a converted bus. There are some key messages from the programme about transport considerations.

- Some organisations say that without *access to transport* (minibuses) their project would have been impossible to deliver. This was particularly the case for projects working with children with special needs.
- The provision of transport was seen by many organisations as a *necessary first step* towards encouraging people to access green spaces independently. A number of organisations used a staged approach: providing transport first but then encouraging the use of public transport over time.
- The *costs associated with using public transport can be prohibitive* for some people. One organisation described how it was necessary to meet people at bus stops to give them the money for the journey rather than reimbursing them at a later date.
- Providing *translated materials* about directions to sites and bus routes was necessary in some instances.
- People’s *attitudes towards public transport can evolve over time*. For example, one project reported that initially the costs of public transport were presented as an insurmountable barrier, yet by the end of the project the same groups were making plans to raise the money for travel costs.

The weather and terrain

“We knew that, as many of the young people would lack suitable clothing, we would need to provide fleece tops, walking boots, and even complete changes of clothing and towels in case they got a soaking whilst canoeing or gorge-walking. This has indeed proved necessary, as even though each group’s pre-course information pack included suggested personal kit-lists, the majority of young people still arrive inadequately dressed and equipped.”

Environmental Education and Access, Nottinghamshire YMCA

Many organisations provided people with waterproof clothing, walking boots, wellies, spare gloves, hats and even socks. Once again, there are key messages from the programme about the importance of ensuring people are appropriately prepared.

- People need *clear advance information* about the terrain and likely weather conditions and may need opportunities to discuss their fears or concerns with trusted workers.
- The offer of *appropriate clothing* can be one of the most important factors in determining whether people have a positive experience outdoors.
- In the winter months, it can help to keep *sessions short*.
- When engaging people for the first time, it can be better to schedule activities during the *warmer months* of the year.
- Although children and young people *may initially view outdoor clothing as ‘uncool’* their attitudes can change as they become more accustomed to being outdoors and understand the importance of being suitably dressed.
- Suitable clothing can offer children a *new sense of ‘freedom’* to explore their natural environment freely.

9.6 The role of Natural England as enabler

The evaluation of Access to Nature has revealed the vital contribution that Natural England has played as enablers of adaptation, innovation and creativity on the ground. Previous reports have highlighted for example how the responsive and constructive guidance of Lead Advisers allowed projects to evolve and develop in a more organic fashion. Similarly, the emphasis on formative self-evaluation gave projects a changing picture of progress, and helped inform changes to delivery and management as required ²⁴.

The role that Natural England has taken with regard to Access to Nature is aligned with the concept of ‘Funder as Enabler’²⁵. This is a set of ideas about how the funder shifts its role from that of provider to enabler in order to mobilise local assets and enable locally led change to take place. Five characteristics of the funder as enabler have been embodied in Access to Nature.

<i>Investing in people and organisations with a strong, locally held vision for change</i>	Natural England funded organisations that understood how to engage people. Outcome 5 strove to embed the work and create local ownership
<i>Supporting activities that unlock potential</i>	There was a strong emphasis across the programme on building confidence and skills in order to increase on-going involvement with the natural environment and local ownership of green spaces
<i>Co-defining the funding relationship</i>	Projects had a degree of freedom to experiment, reflect and adapt
<i>Fostering supportive relationships</i>	Lead Advisers developed good, supportive relationships with projects, acting as ‘critical friend’
<i>Embedding a learning culture</i>	Formative evaluation of the programme meant it was possible to capture real time learning and ensure it had the greatest impact

Footnote 24 Further information about the Access to Nature formative evaluation process is summarised in the following Learning Paper:
Icarus (2013) *A Learning Programme – How embedding evaluation has added value to Access to Nature*. UK: Natural England.
See <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/>

Footnote 25 This is a concept that Icarus has developed with Nesta as Learning Partner in their Neighbourhood Challenge programme. More information can be accessed at http://www.nesta.org.uk/areas_of_work/public_services_lab/past_projects_public_services_lab/neighbourhood_challenge/assets/features/neighbourhood_challenge_learning_paper

Further information about this concept is also included in the following evaluation report:

Icarus (2013) *Access to Nature Final Evaluation Report*. UK: Natural England.

See <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/>

10

Section ten:

Summary and conclusions



10. Summary and conclusions

10.1 Ambition in a time of change

Access to Nature was an ambitious programme that sought to bring about lasting change in the relationship between the natural environment and people across England who had little or no previous contact with nature.

The programme set out to create connections and build awareness and understanding for people about the natural places around them. It was driven by the belief that, given the right opportunities, people who had previously seen the natural environment as irrelevant or peripheral to their lives, would discover the benefits, for themselves and for nature, of being outdoors. Then that they would come to value those benefits and develop a level of care and commitment for the natural places around them.

Access to Nature was ambitious in its scope – the programme was focused on those communities and people where the levels of awareness and engagement with nature were evidenced as being the lowest in the country. **It was also ambitious in its approach** – the work sought a broad coalition of providers across the public, voluntary and community sectors, drawing in organisations new to working with nature, and encouraging those familiar with nature to apply their knowledge with new people and communities.

The programme also used an **innovative approach to learning from practice**. It employed a formative, self-evaluation model that encouraged regular reporting and reflection, and used on-going dialogue between projects, Natural England and Icarus as a tool to gather and interpret information. This gave the evaluators the unique chance to interact with Natural England and the deliverers of the work over the five-year life of the programme, learning with the programme as it developed.

Access to Nature straddled a period of substantial change in the wider economy and the public and voluntary sectors. The shrinkage of those sectors has affected each component of the programme in a variety of ways, and the achievements detailed in this final paper are testament to the dedication and adaptability of all involved in the programme.

10.2 Access to Nature – an engagement system

A key piece of learning from the evaluation of Access to Nature has been the discovery of the inter-relationship between the changes brought about by the programme activities. This showed that the connections between the desired outcomes were dynamic, with the achievements associated with one outcome (such as learning) shaping and influencing others (such as the development of ownership).

In this way, Access to Nature was an ‘engagement system’, with each component and activity contributing at different levels and across different outcomes for participants.

Projects designed and adapted their practice to respond to the situations, needs, and aspirations of those they were working with in communities. The evidence has shown that good engagement starts with a sound knowledge and understanding of the people to be engaged and that building relationships between people and nature is dependent on an ability to adapt and respond to participants’ needs and ambitions as work progresses. Access to Nature has demonstrated the value of an approach grounded less in convention and more in adaptability, innovation and creativity.

The programme evolved a new way of working, one which blended core knowledge and skills in working with nature with the relationship building skills common to community development practice. A clear message from the programme is that, on their own, environment-related skills are not sufficient to achieve sustained engagement. This new blend of skills enabled people to feel welcome in new settings; to enjoy and feel safe in their first outdoor experiences; to grow in confidence and skills; and to make the connections that encouraged further involvement and interest in the natural environment.

Another key element to the engagement system was the habit of forming good working collaborations with partners and organisations already on the ground in communities. These were important in overcoming barriers to engagement and creating resilient local structures and relationships. They were also critical in opening doors for projects and using their links with people to encourage them to take the first step. The need to make it easy for people to connect with nature has also been evidenced, providing basic, but essential, resources to overcome practical barriers such as a lack of transport or suitable clothing.

A further pivotal relationship within the engagement system has been that between Natural England and those delivering the programme on its behalf. Natural England has evolved a new way of working, becoming an ‘enabling funder’, balancing support, challenge and accountability within a spirit of learning. This has facilitated reflective and enquiring practice from projects.

10.3 Significant achievements

Access to Nature has been highly successful. Whether considered in terms of the quality of the outcomes generated for people and nature or the programme's numerical achievements, Access to Nature accomplished a great deal in establishing the connection and relationship between people and nature.

The changes brought about by Access to Nature are reflected in the engagement system and have a strong inter-connectedness with each other. The programme generated substantial impact in three areas; wellbeing, learning and ownership, while simultaneously improving the quality of, and access to, local natural places.

Wellbeing benefits

The wellbeing benefits created by Access to Nature came about through the emphasis on the provision of new opportunities. As projects hooked people into first encounters with nature, they gave the chance for people to explore and discover new environments, and all they have to offer. This led to people describing and reporting a range of benefits, all of which have enhanced the wellbeing of participants.

- Children have found new places to play and to develop social skills.
- Adults have discovered nature (and things about themselves).
- People are more active, feel calmer and more relaxed.
- New friendships and connections have formed.
- Family relationships have been strengthened through the experience of doing things together.

Access to Nature has been excellent at providing this first connection with nature, and in helping people to feel confident to take the next step, often through the simple act of making it easy for people to know where they could access nature, how to get there, and what they could do when they got there.

Learning benefits

As people came into contact with nature, the programme gave them chances to learn. A great success of Access to Nature was its ability to use the outdoors as a classroom, where people gained an understanding of the natural world, how it works, and how it can be supported. A potent mix of simple learning opportunities combined with practically applying skills and knowledge in the outdoors alongside others was highly effective.

The programme gave people new knowledge that was brought to life by using it to improve local natural places, and encouraged many to move on to gain a formal qualification. It also supported mainstream learning for children and built a body of practitioners in schools, children's centres and community organisations who are now confident outdoor learning practitioners. This means the programme has substantially added to the volume of people in England who know enough about their local green spaces to enjoy and appreciate them, to conserve and maintain them and to help others to learn about them.

Ownership benefits

The relationships built through Access to Nature have been critical in achieving a sense of ownership and commitment among participants towards nature. The programme has provided strong evidence that, for those with limited experience of nature, a first encounter is not enough to change the way people think about, feel about or use the natural environment. It also evidenced that building on first encounters *can* bring about those changes. Through a 'stepping stones' approach which works at the pace of those involved, an empowering style that gives people the chance to grow and do things themselves, and a belief in offering people the chance to work on projects that matter to them, Access to Nature fostered the ownership of local natural places. The time now being spent by people outdoors, the new groups formed to care for local sites, the new activities being hosted by local people, and the new learning about the natural world, are all indicative of a step change in how people have come to regard and care for the natural environment.

Benefits for natural places

The success of the programme has been possible because of the focus on improving quality and access to local sites, and the willingness to offer people the chance to discover, learn and care for places close by. The combination of well targeted investment and people volunteering time and skills learnt through Access to Nature has meant that many natural places are now more visible, easier to access and navigate, better used, better managed, cleaner and more hospitable for wildlife habitats. The programme also contributed to increased biodiversity that will only be fully realised in years to come. The shifts in knowledge and ownership achieved by the programme suggest that increases in quality and access will be lasting, as people use their new-found enthusiasm and skills to continue to conserve and manage natural places.

Connecting with communities

The scale of the programme's reach into communities, and the degree to which it has enabled positive outcomes for those who became involved, has been impressive. Nearly 950,000 people took up the opportunity to experience and enjoy nature, many for the very first time. Investment in local green spaces, many of them in the heart of communities, has been substantial; access improvements were made at over 2,800 sites across England and improvements to the quality of the natural environment undertaken at over 2,500 sites. This opened up the potential for those sites to reach new and wider audiences, and the aggregated figures from project reports show that nearly 640,000 people used the improved access to sites, and over 800,000 benefitted from the improvements to quality.

Crucially, the programme also enabled people to move on from their first encounters with the natural environment, offering them the chance to learn about nature and apply that learning through practical work in natural places. Over 640,000 people undertook a learning activity through Access to Nature, and nearly 42,000 people took the next step in their learning by participating in a training or development programme. This in turn generated commitment, leading to over 34,000 people volunteering to regularly give their time in caring for and maintaining natural places.

10.4 In summary

Access to Nature brought about a step change in how people with little or no contact with the natural environment perceive the opportunities offered by having a connection with nature. The evaluation of the programme has evidenced that, given the right opportunities, people who had previously seen the natural environment as irrelevant or peripheral to their lives, will discover the benefits, for themselves and for nature, of being outdoors, and come to value those benefits and develop a level of care and commitment for the natural places around them.

The patchwork of projects established by Access to Nature evolved into an engagement system, through which people have been brought into contact with nature, found out about nature, learnt to care for nature, and developed a sense of involvement and ownership with natural places around them. The impact of the programme has been significant in many ways.

- Access to Nature has demonstrated that *good engagement starts with a sound knowledge and understanding of the people to be engaged*, and that building relationships between people and nature is dependent on an ability to adapt and respond to participants needs and ambitions as work progresses.
- The programme has shown that *blending core knowledge and skills* in working with nature with the relationship building skills common to community development practice is an effective means of enabling good connections between people and nature.
- Forming *good working collaborations with partners* and organisations already on the ground in communities, and making it easy for people to connect with nature by providing basic, but essential, resources to overcome practical barriers such as a lack of transport or suitable clothing, are also keys to successful engagement.
- Access to Nature has generated *substantial impact for people previously disengaged from nature* in terms of wellbeing, learning and ownership, while simultaneously improving the quality of, and access to, local natural places.
- In doing so, the programme has also created a *substantial legacy* in the volume of people in communities who now know about, care for and have an active role in conserving the natural places around them

11

Section eleven:
Appendices



Appendix one

Outcomes cross referencing table

Access to Nature Outcomes	Outcome 1 Improved opportunities	Outcome 2 Learning	Outcome 3 Access -physical & virtual	Outcome 4 Quality	Outcome 5 Ownership
Access to Nature Vision					
High quality environments which are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valued and accessible • Rich in wildlife and opportunities for learning, health and well being • Safe, clean and attractive and well used 	●	●	●	●	●
Big Lottery Changing Spaces Outcomes					
Improved local environments, open spaces and countryside – accessible to all and relevant to needs?	●		●	●	
A greater sense of community ownership of local natural places					●
Improved social, economic and environmental sustainability		●		●	
Natural England's strategic outcomes					
England's natural environment will be conserved and enhanced			●	●	
More people are inspired to enjoy, understand and act for the natural environment	●				●
The use and management of the environment is more sustainable				●	●
Decisions which collectively secure the future of the natural environment					●

Appendix two

Evaluation framework

Broad Evaluation Questions	Specific evaluation questions	Key stakeholders	Source of data	Methodology
Impact: : Targets and Outcomes				
1 What contribution has the A2N programme made to the Big Lottery's Changing Spaces Outcomes?	<p>1a) What evidence is there that the A2N programme has contributed to improved local environments, open spaces and countryside – accessible to all and relevant to needs?</p> <p>1b) What evidence is there that the A2N programme has contributed to a greater sense of community ownership of local natural places?</p> <p>1c) What evidence is there that the A2N programme has improved social, economic and environmental sustainability?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A2N Steering Group • A2N Project Board • A2N Project Team • Grant recipients • Independent Grants Panel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation reference groups: monitoring reports and maps • Icarus interim evaluation reports • Reports from the project team including six monthly reports to the Board • Six monthly progress reports from grant recipients • Interview evidence • On line survey evidence • Case Study evidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On line surveys • Interviews • Desk based research • Focus group • Case studies

Continued on following pages

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Broad Evaluation Questions	Specific evaluation questions	Key stakeholders	Source of data	Methodology
<p>2 What contribution has the A2N programme made to Natural England's strategic outcomes and supporting evidence base?</p>	<p>2a) To what extent has the A2N programme contributed evidence about how 'people are inspired to enjoy, understand and act for the natural environment'?</p> <p>2b) What evidence is there that the programme has contributed to the conservation, enhancement and good management of England's natural environment?</p> <p>2c) How robust is the evidence base that is being generated by the Programme and how is this being used?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural England Evidence Team • A2N National Project Team • Grant recipients • Regional advisers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation reference group: reports and maps • Icarus interim evaluation reports • Reports from the project team • Six-monthly progress reports from grant recipients • Case study evidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On line surveys • Interviews • Desk based research • Focus group • Case studies
<p>3 To what extent has the Consortium's vision for the A2N programme been realised?</p>	<p>3a) What evidence is there that the programme has contributed to high quality environments which are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valued and accessible • Rich in wildlife and opportunities for learning, health and well being • Safe, clean and attractive and well used 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A2N Steering group • A2N Project Board • A2N National Project Team • Natural England Evidence Team • Grant recipients and their stakeholders • Regional advisers • Independent Grants Panel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation reference group: monitoring reports and maps • Icarus interim evaluation reports • Reports from the project team • Six-monthly progress reports from grant recipients • Monthly updates from grant recipients • Case study evidence • Interview evidence • On line survey evidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On line surveys • Interviews • Desk based research • Focus group • Case studies

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Broad Evaluation Questions	Specific evaluation questions	Key stakeholders	Source of data	Methodology
<p>4 To what extent has the A2N programme achieved its 5 main outcomes and related targets?</p>	<p>4a) What impact has the A2N programme had on the diversity and number of people that have improved opportunities to experience the natural environment (outcome 1)?</p> <p>4b) What impact has A2N programme had on the number of people that have opportunities for learning about the natural environment (outcome 2)?</p> <p>4c) What impact has A2N programme had on the number of people that are able to enjoy the natural environment as a result of investment in access to natural places and networks between sites? (outcome 3)?</p> <p>4d) What impact has the A2N programme had on improving the quality of natural places so that they are better able to meet the needs of local people and wildlife (outcome 4)?</p> <p>4e) What impact has the A2N programme had on communities' sense of ownership of local natural places? (outcome 5)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A2N Steering group • A2N Project Board • A2N National Project Team • Natural England Evidence Team • Grant recipients and their stakeholders • Regional advisers • Independent Grants Panel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation reference group: monitoring reports and maps • Icarus interim evaluation reports • Reports from the project team • Six-monthly progress reports from grant recipients • Monthly updates from grant recipients • Case Study evidence • Interview evidence • On line survey evidence • Grant assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On line surveys • Interviews • Desk based research • Focus group • Case studies

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Broad Evaluation Questions	Specific evaluation questions	Key stakeholders	Source of data	Methodology
<p>5 To what extent has the A2N programme reached its target beneficiaries?</p>	<p>5a) To what degree of success has the programme engaged people currently under-represented in terms of contact with the natural environment (including disabled people, the young, black and minority ethnic communities and older people)</p> <p>5b) To what degree of success has the programme engaged people disadvantaged by where they live through a lack of accessible natural environments?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A2N Steering group • A2N Project Board • A2N National Project Team • Natural England Evidence Team • Grant recipients and their stakeholders • Regional advisers • Independent Grants Panel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation reference group: monitoring reports and maps, including targeting maps and targeting hits • Icarus interim evaluation reports • Reports from the project team • Six-monthly progress reports from grant recipients • Monthly updates from grant recipients • Case study evidence • Interview evidence • On line survey evidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On line surveys • Interviews • Desk based research • Focus group • Case studies

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Broad Evaluation Questions	Specific evaluation questions	Key stakeholders	Source of data	Methodology
<p>6 What has been learnt from the A2N programme about the approaches that are needed to achieve the 5 main outcomes and related targets, and reach the target beneficiaries (i.e. good practice legacy)?</p>	<p>6a) Which approaches have been particularly successful or effective in terms of achieving the 5 main outcomes and related targets, and reaching the target beneficiaries?</p> <p>6b) Why were these approaches successful?</p> <p>6c) What challenges and barriers has the programme encountered in relation to achieving the A2N programme outcomes and related targets and reaching the target beneficiaries?</p> <p>6d) How have these challenges and barriers been overcome?</p> <p>6e) How are lessons learned and good practice identified?</p> <p>6f) How is this information being used?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A2N Steering group • A2N Project Board • A2N National Project Team • Natural England Evidence Team • Grant recipients and their stakeholders • Regional advisers • Independent Grants Panel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence team: monitoring reports and maps • Icarus interim evaluation reports • Reports from the project team • Six-monthly progress reports from grant recipients • Monthly updates from grant recipients • Case study evidence • Interview evidence • On line survey evidence • Action plans following interim evaluations • Conference evaluation • Outcomes spreadsheet • KPI reports to Big Lottery (quarterly and annual) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On line surveys • Interviews • Desk based research • Focus group • Case studies

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Broad Evaluation Questions	Specific evaluation questions	Key stakeholders	Source of data	Methodology
<p>7 How successful have the regions been in implementing their targeting plans?</p>	<p>7a) To what extent have grant recipients contributed to achieving the priorities identified in their region's targeting plans?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A2N Project Board • A2N Project Team • Regional advisers • Grant recipients • Independent Grants Panel • Evidence Team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation reference group: monitoring reports and maps • Reports from the project team • Six-monthly progress reports from grant recipients • Monthly updates from grant recipients • Case Study evidence • Interview/focus group evidence • On line survey evidence • Grant assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk top research • On line surveys • Telephone interviews • Focus groups • Case studies

Continued from previous page

Broad Evaluation Questions	Specific evaluation questions	Key stakeholders	Source of data	Methodology
Process				
<p>8 To what extent has Natural England managed the programme effectively and efficiently?</p>	<p>8a) Has the process of managing and steering the programme been effective and efficient?</p> <p>8b) Has the process of selecting projects been efficient?</p> <p>8c) Has the process of selecting projects been effective in terms of securing a spread of grant aid across regions, project and application types?</p> <p>8d) To what extent has the process of gathering information from successful projects been effective and efficient?</p> <p>8e) Have projects had access to the right support at the right time?</p> <p>8f) To what extent have opportunities to improve programme management been identified and acted upon?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A2N Project Board • A2N Project Team • Regional advisers • Independent Grants Panel • Grant recipients • Evidence Team • Unsuccessful grant applicants • Big Lottery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case study evidence • Interview/focus group evidence • On line survey evidence • Grant assessments • KPI reports to Big Lottery • NE internal audit reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk top research • On line surveys • Telephone interviews • Focus groups • Case studies

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Broad Evaluation Questions	Specific evaluation questions	Key stakeholders	Source of data	Methodology
<p>9 How well are projects progressing against their proposed timescales/action plans?</p>	<p>9a) To what degree have projects been able to meet their proposed timescales and action plans?</p> <p>9b) What challenges and barriers have emerged in relation to delivering the project work plans and how have they been addressed/ overcome?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A2N Project team • Regional advisers • Grant recipients 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence team: monitoring reports and maps • Reports from the project team • Six-monthly progress reports from grant recipients • Monthly updates from grant recipients • Case study evidence • Interview/focus group evidence • On line survey evidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk top research • On line surveys • Telephone interviews • Focus groups • Case studies
<p>10 What methodologies have been used to gather monitoring and evaluation evidence by projects and how successful have these been?</p>	<p>10a) How have the projects developed their evaluation methodologies?</p> <p>10b) What factors have helped and hindered projects in gathering the monitoring evaluation evidence?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A2N Project team • Regional advisers • Grant recipients 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence team: monitoring reports and maps • Reports from the project team • Six-monthly progress reports from grant recipients • Monthly updates from grant recipients • Case study evidence • Interview/focus group evidence • On line survey evidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk top research • On line surveys • Telephone interviews • Focus groups • Case studies

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Broad Evaluation Questions	Specific evaluation questions	Key stakeholders	Source of data	Methodology
Inputs				
11 Have the inputs to the A2N programme and projects been adequate to ensure the delivery of an effective and efficient programme?	11a) Have the human resources devoted to the management and delivery of the A2N programme been sufficient? 11b) Have the financial resources devoted to the management and delivery of the A2N programme been sufficient? 11c) What changes to the human or financial investment into the programme should or could be made and why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A2N Project Board • A2N Project Team • Regional advisers • Independent Grants Panel • Project stakeholders • Big Lottery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports from the project team • Case study evidence • Interview/focus group evidence • On line survey evidence • NE internal audit reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk top research • On line surveys • Telephone interviews • Focus groups • Case studies
Context				
12 What influence, if any, have internal or external contextual factors had on the management and delivery of the A2N programme?	12a) Have there been any significant internal contextual factors that have influenced the management and delivery of the A2N programme? 12b) Have there been any significant external contextual factors that have influenced the management and delivery of the A2N programme? 12c) In what ways has the programme been affected and what difference has this made to the impact on the vision, outcomes and related targets of the A2N programme?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A2N Project Board • A2N Project Team • Regional advisers • Independent Grants Panel • Big Lottery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports from the project team • Case study evidence • Interview/focus group evidence • On line survey evidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk top research • On line surveys • Telephone interviews • Focus groups • Case studies

Appendix 3

The Access to Nature evaluation process

Introduction

Icarus was appointed in Spring 2009 to develop and implement an evaluation process for the Access to Nature programme. This has been a formative approach to evaluation, where the evaluation has been on-going and has fed back into management and planning processes to inform the development of the programme as it progressed. As such, it has been a vital management tool because, critically, formative evaluation highlights the key lessons, achievements and issues as they arise, enabling informed decision-making about the programme's future direction to take place.

About evaluation

Evaluation is: *The systematic process of gathering and assessing information about a project to learn about how well it is progressing towards what it set out to do.*

In the case of Access to Nature the approach has been **formative evaluation**, meaning that the evaluation commenced right at the start of the programme and continued until its end. It is an approach that assessed the effectiveness of the projects' approach to both management and delivery, as well as the extent to which they were achieving their outcomes, on an on-going basis. It also included the parallel assessment of progress with regards to programme management, and an overall aggregation of evidence to understand the impact of the programme as a whole.

There are **two major benefits** of this type of evaluation and these reflect Natural England's aspirations for an iterative and insightful process of on-going review.

- Firstly, it tells the funder and other stakeholders at regular intervals about the progress that has been made as a result of the investment in the programme.
- Secondly, it is about reflective practice and action learning. At programme level it provides insights into the effectiveness of the management so that changes can be made (where feasible) to improve programme delivery. For projects it builds an understanding of the effectiveness of their approach, and how this is affecting the progress they are making towards achieving their outcomes. This kind of critical feedback helps the programme and projects alike to assess whether they are on the right track and to decide where action is needed to amend their approach to management or delivery.

The Access to Nature formative approach to evaluation

At the outset, this kind of formative evaluation was new to Natural England and was not commonplace in the environmental sector. Natural England and many of the Access to Nature projects started with little experience in assessing progress against outcomes. There was a degree of risk in imposing a standardised evaluation approach onto third party projects in a national programme as diverse as this, and where the emphasis would be for projects to manage their own evaluation within an overarching framework. To be successful the evaluation therefore needed a number of factors to be in place.

- **A single, overall structure** – an evaluation framework was developed by Icarus, together with the programme’s Evaluation Reference Group, and was applied consistently at both programme and project level throughout the lifetime of Access to Nature (see Appendix 2).
- **A planned approach** – the evaluation process was guided by three key phases – *planning it*, *doing it* and *using it* – each of which had a number of constituent elements.
- **A shared understanding of outcomes** – Icarus and Natural England agreed a process to review the outcomes of each project awarded a grant. This ensured that each funded organisation understood the nature of the changes they were working towards, that those outcomes were SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timebound), and Natural England could be assured that each project’s work would align with the programme outcomes and goals.
- **An embedded process** – the goal was to ensure that evaluation was an integral part of Access to Nature and not a ‘bolt on’ or reporting headache. In practice it was a great achievement that over 90% of projects responded constructively to the evaluation requirements.
- **Skills and expertise in evaluation** – it was important to build skills and expertise in evaluation across Natural England’s Access to Nature staff team and in projects, and to an appropriate level. It wasn’t necessary for everyone to become an ‘evaluation expert’, only that they would pro-actively engage in the evaluation process, and could understand the benefits of the reflection and review process that the evaluation facilitated. By providing templates and training, offering on-going support, and giving feedback on evaluation reporting, Icarus ensured that both the Access to Nature team and the projects could engage with the process easily and in a straightforward way, while building their own capacity in evaluation.
- **A feedback loop** – Icarus designed a structured process for delivering constructive feedback on evaluation reports and findings. At a programme level, this involved dialogue and action planning with Natural England and partner bodies, and at project level a written report was produced and fed back to projects through their Natural England Lead Adviser.

- **Useful and usable evaluation products** – Icarus sought to ensure that the evaluation findings it reported provided insights into the programme and that the recommendations were usable and workable. At programme level there were annual summaries of progress, followed by a post report action planning session; a set of thematic Learning Papers each year; a *Building Good Grants Programmes* paper; a review of the implementation of the Supporting Change and Impact funding; and a forward looking think piece on embedding evaluation in grant programmes across Natural England²⁶. At project level the evaluation report template was designed to ensure the Access to Nature evaluation questions were addressed, and to ensure projects gave a well-rounded picture of their own progress.
- **Independent advice and a high degree of trust** – the independent perspective of Icarus was key in ensuring the evaluation process remained on track, and that any difficult issues that emerged from it were not buried. This worked because of the dynamic and positive partnership approach that both Natural England and Icarus brought into, and the trust that developed between them as a result.

Footnote 26 See: Natural England Publications and Products - Access to Nature (A2N) publications – <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/category>

Appendix four

Summary of additional project achievements

The following figures have been sourced from projects' final evaluation reports. It should be noted however that not all projects have recorded their achievements against these measures, nor are they applicable to all projects. As a result they do not represent the full picture of projects' achievements in these areas but they have been included in this Appendix to give some sense of Access to Nature's impact, and should be regarded as the minimum level of impact achieved.

Number of John Muir Awards	Number of John Muir leader awards	Number of Forest School leader awards	Number of people gaining other accredited awards via a recognised academic route
2,542	295	105	681
Number of people completing apprenticeships, traineeships etc.	Number of people gained employment / self employment in the natural environment sector	Number of footpaths created	Number of trees planted
10	28	36	13,306

Alternative formats

Our documents are available as pdf downloads from our website, suitable for text reader technology. We may be able to provide other formats (e.g. Braille, a minority language, or large print) for specific documents where there is a proven communication need.

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