



December 2011:  
Interim evaluation report 3

# Access to Nature

“the sheer emotional  
power of when it works”

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# 1

Section one:

## Background to this report





Section one:

# Background to this report

## 1.1 Introduction

### 1.1.1 Background to this report

Icarus was appointed in spring 2009 to develop and implement an evaluation process for the Access to Nature programme. This is a formative approach to evaluation, where the evaluation is ongoing and feeds back into management and planning processes to inform future development of the programme. As such, it is a vital management tool; formative evaluation highlights the key lessons and issues as they arise, contributing to informed decision making about the programme's future direction.

This is therefore a formative evaluation report, the third in a five year delivery period: it summarises the findings of the third tranche of evaluative work undertaken as part of the national evaluation of Access to Nature. This evaluation activity has taken place over the period August to October 2011 in what is in effect the fourth year of programme delivery since Access to Nature opened for applications on 28 April 2008.

It is the key task for an evaluator to provide an overview of progress against the programme goals. Evaluation report one was published in December 2009 and evaluation report two in December 2010, and both were typical of evaluation reports early in a programme's evolution; evidence of overall impact was minimal and the focus was more on programme level management and delivery. This report however has a different flavour – with 34 project level interim evaluation reports completed, evidence for the programme's impact is starting to emerge and there can be a significant focus on how and what projects are delivering, and to what effect. Yet, it should be recognised that the evidence of impact is still not fully formed and cannot be until a substantial number of funded projects have completed and reviewed their work in final evaluations.

The evaluation addresses a series of key questions within an evaluation framework (see Appendix 1) that has been developed by Icarus in conjunction with the programme's Evaluation Reference Group. This framework has been consistently applied from the start of the evaluation process.

## 1.1.2 The Access to Nature programme

Access to Nature is a grants programme within the Big Lottery Fund's Changing Spaces, which was created to help communities enjoy and improve their natural environments.

The programme is being managed by Natural England on behalf of a consortium of 12 national environmental organisations comprising BTCV, British Waterways, Environment Agency, Forestry Commission, Greenspace, Groundwork UK, Land Restoration Trust, The National Trust, Natural England, RSPB, the Wildlife Trusts and the Woodland Trust. A Steering Group of representatives from the consortium has acted as a sounding board for the ongoing development of the programme and has provided the opportunity for Natural England to access the skills and knowledge of its partners in shaping progress. The Steering Group and Project Board roles were reviewed in 2011 and a joint, successor body is now established with members from each of the original two groups creating a new forum.

Access to Nature was initially a £25million grant programme to encourage people from diverse backgrounds to understand and enjoy the natural environment; a further £3.75million was added to this pot early in 2010. The **vision** is for **high quality environments** which are:

- Highly valued by people and accessible to all
- Rich in wildlife and in opportunities for learning, health and well being
- Safe, clean, attractive and well used by people for their recreation and enjoyment

Grants have been available from £50,000 to £500,000, with up to five flagship projects awarded more than £500,000. The overall **aim** is to bring lasting change to people's awareness of, access to and engagement with the natural environment.

Successful projects must contribute to Access to Nature **outcomes** - outcome five and at least one other as a minimum requirement. **Targets** linked to each outcome emphasise the aspiration to benefit 1.7million people through the grant programme.

### Outcome 1:

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

*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.

*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.

*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.

*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.

*Target 5a.* 100% of projects actively and positively engaging with local communities.

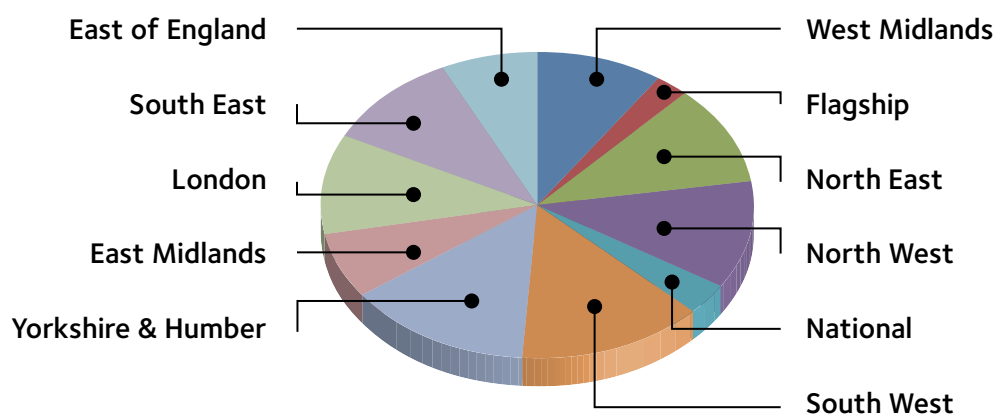
In addition projects must focus on at least one of the **target beneficiary groups**:

- People currently under represented in terms of contact with the natural environment, including disabled people, the young, black and ethnic minority communities 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

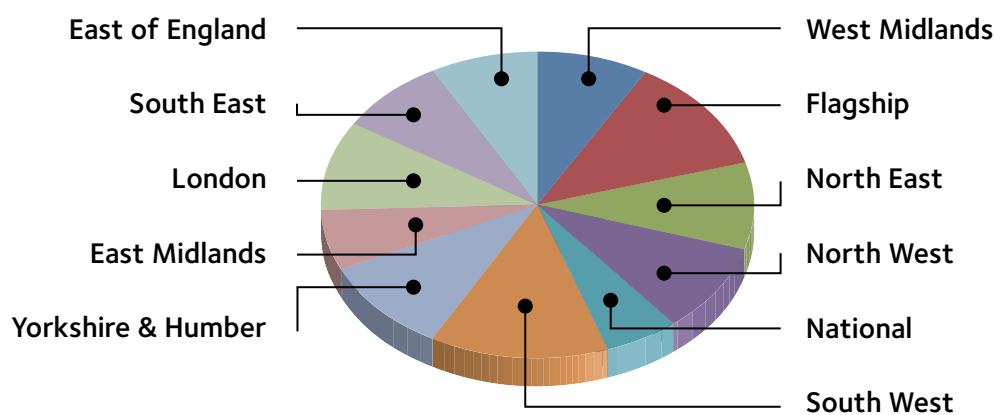
## 1.1.3 Progress with Access to Nature

115 Access to Nature grant awards have been made, totalling £26,776,068. Of these, four are national projects, three are flagships, and the remainder are spread across the regions, as follows.

**Table 1:** Distribution of number of projects by region



**Table 2:** Distribution of project funding by region



## 1.1.4 The context for Access to Nature in 2011

2011 has seen a number of contextual changes that impact on Access to Nature and its funded projects. The economic downturn has been particularly difficult for many projects which have faced organisational restructures (their own and those of partners), changing partner priorities, loss of key contacts and difficulties accessing matched funding.

Natural England has itself not been immune to this and has undergone a major re-organisation. The Access to Nature team has shrunk and management capacity has been reduced.

At the same time however the political climate has shifted to an emphasis on local empowerment. At the core of the Government's vision of the Big Society is the belief that people should be empowered to improve their communities and shape the services they receive. Similarly the Localism agenda is concerned with the transfer of power and resources from central government to the local level. It is underpinned by the idea that decisions should be taken as closely as possible to the people they affect. Localism can also mean allowing local people to set priorities and become involved in decisions about the future of their area.

Access to Nature has a key role to play at this critical time, through encouraging and facilitating community involvement and action at the neighbourhood level in response to local needs, particularly with those who have little or no previous contact with the natural environment. Equally this chimes with Natural England's work on the diversity agenda through the Outdoors for All initiative and a range of other related policies.

## 1.1.5 Report structure

This is a formative evaluation report, the third report for a five year delivery period. At this point in the programme's evolution evidence of impact is starting to emerge; a total of 34 interim project evaluation reports have been completed and many other projects are well into their delivery period and have been able to offer good reflections on their progress to date. This is an exciting phase in the lifetime of Access to Nature which this report aims to capture.

As a result this report is structured to emphasise the learning that is emerging from projects across the following areas:

- How projects are being managed, what is working and where the challenges lie
- An analysis of the approaches and methods projects are using, plus their relative success in reaching target beneficiaries and progress towards their SMART outcomes
- Exploring projects' success in achieving their outcomes and the impact and changes they are making

At this stage in the programme life cycle, there is more evidence available against the first and second of these points; while there is some information on impact it remains somewhat limited. These factors affect the level of penetration this evaluation can achieve on each of these three lines of investigation and as a result the reflection on project management and approaches and methods is more fully formed.



In addition, there is a brief discussion in the report of programme management and of any implications for the day to day running of projects. The key learning from the two previous evaluation reports – which primarily focus on project management – is also included as Appendix 2.

- **Section two: key evaluation findings – project management and delivery –** summarises the key evaluation findings about how individual projects are being run in terms of project planning, internal management and partnership working and identifies the key learning for future funding programmes; summarises the key evaluation findings about the methods projects are using and how this affects their reach, plus the key learning for future funding programmes; reflects on progress against the five Access to Nature outcomes; summarises the key learning
- **Section three: key evaluation findings – programme management –** briefly examines the current programme management situation; summarises the key learning.

# 1.2 Evaluation methodology and approach

## 1.2.1 The evaluation process

Evaluation of the Access to Nature programme has been directed and guided by an Evaluation Reference Group, currently comprising the Access to Nature Evaluation Lead Adviser in the Access Grant Schemes Team (Customer Services function) and a representative of Natural England's Evidence Team. They meet and communicate regularly with Icarus, and support the evaluation process.

The critical task for the Reference Group in this evaluation – as in any evaluation – is to assess progress against what the programme set out to do. This requires two levels of analysis and feedback. Firstly, how has the work of the programme progressed? Secondly, what does this all add up to in terms of progress against the stated outcomes?

The evaluation framework is the principal, guiding document for this process of analysis and feedback, and is the standard tool for any piece of evaluation. It breaks the programme down into its constituent elements and determines what questions need to be asked in order to establish overall progress, and suggests the evidence that informs this analysis. It therefore requires consistency in the application of the broad questions across the lifetime of the programme, and in this case formed the basis of a five year evaluation action plan signed off by Natural England in July 2009.

Intrinsically, the framework also provides the mechanism by which progress can be measured against not only the Access to Nature outcomes, but also Natural England's strategic outcomes and Big Lottery's Changing Spaces outcomes.

The framework is applied in a number of ways and underpins a range of evaluation products. It supports what is primarily a **self evaluation process**; the onus is on projects to engage in self evaluation and to report their findings to Icarus for collation and aggregation. As a result, the data upon which Icarus makes judgements about the overall progress against the programme outcomes relies heavily upon reports produced by the projects.

To some degree, this is less straightforward than it may seem: programme applicants were not briefed about the evaluation requirements prior to the award of a grant (particularly for early applicants) and many projects have not allocated evaluation budgets. Coupled with the fact that evaluation is not a contractual requirement, the result could be low levels of commitment to evaluation by projects.

On a more positive note, the Access to Evaluation approach and the evaluation briefing workshops for projects have been very well received.

Evaluation action plans have been supplied by every project that has attended a workshop. Recent changes to the evaluation support offered to projects is providing detailed feedback on project evaluation reports and will further help build skills and capacity across the funded organisations. Indeed, it is the case that of the 13 reports formally reviewed to date six have been described as good or satisfactory; five are acceptable although have aspects that could

be improved; and only two were deemed of very poor quality. This pattern is also felt to reflect the spread across project reports received before the formal review procedure was in place.

As more projects engage in evaluation activity and produce their evaluation reports, it will be gradually easier to assess the overall level of engagement with evaluation.

## 1.2.2 Evaluation activities

This report is one of a series of annual evaluation reports, presenting an over arching picture of the programme's progress. It will be followed by an action planning session with Natural England staff to begin the process of learning from and taking action on the evaluation findings.

The evaluation activities in this period have focused on establishing the impact of Access to Nature and have comprised:

- Telephone interviews with three lead members of the Access to Nature team; Team Leader, Evaluation Lead Adviser, Senior Adviser
- Two hour focus group attended by the nine Lead Advisers who support projects
- Telephone interview with the Evidence Team adviser who is a member of the Evaluation Reference Group
- Online questionnaire completed by five members of the Access to Nature Steering Group and Project Board
- On line questionnaire completed by 69 grantees
- Detailed analysis of the 34 completed project evaluation reports, plus QPRs
- In depth telephone interviews with a sample of 19 projects
- Desk based research across a range of reporting mechanisms, standard paper work and reference documentation
- Review meeting with Project Board / Independent Grants Panel February 2011
- Webinar with (Regional) Advisers in January 2011
- Research used for July 2011 Early Findings papers



# 2

Section two:  
Key evaluation findings –

## **Project management and delivery**



## Section two

### Key evaluation findings –

# Project management and delivery

## 2.1 Project management

### 2.1.1 Introduction

Any analysis of the management of Access to Nature projects presents a very mixed picture. For every project that feels under staffed, another believes it has adequate staffing levels; for each one that struggles with project administration and reporting, another does not have any such difficulties. While anecdotally the perception exists that such experiences are a feature of particular kinds of groups – for example, that smaller organisations have particular problems with reporting requirements – there is no evidence to suggest that this is necessarily the case. The only real pattern evident is one that suggests that organisations **which struggle with their quarterly reports are typically the same organisations which find all of the reporting and evaluation requirements challenging.**

It is therefore useful to look at project management from the perspective of the learning that is emerging about the good practice in terms of project planning, internal management and more outward facing partnership arrangements, and what this then means for future funding programmes.

### 2.1.2 Project planning

#### State of readiness

Access to Nature is a somewhat unusual funding programme in the marrying of access to the natural environment with hard to reach groups. However, with Natural England at the helm, it has attracted many projects from organisations more traditionally associated with the access aspect of this picture, and fewer from those with direct experience of the programmes target groups. This is something of a disappointment to Project Board / Independent Grant Panel members. Clear evidence about what difference this makes is difficult to capture, but the perception exists that projects get off the ground more quickly and make inroads into the target groups most effectively when there is a track record of this kind of work and / or where there is a genuine and added value partnership in place. Similarly, it is beneficial if the



organisation has direct on the ground experience in, and a good working knowledge of, the local area where it is known and trusted, and has a range of existing local contacts, or where it has a well researched project plan based on local consultation.

In a classic example of an organisation delivering a project that appears to reflect a lack of understanding of its target groups, a survey respondent says “... *the main challenge is often finding people to take part in the project ..... this is more to do with the groups we target than the project itself ...*”<sup>1</sup>. For another project, their lack of experience of working with their beneficiaries has resulted in a huge learning curve “... *we faced multiple difficulties in working with our target group at the outset of the project and this resulted in a major reformulation of the project’s delivery strategy ... it has been harder work getting there than we imagined it would be ...*”.

Elsewhere, this lack of experience has been manifested in the use of poor information and weak decisions at the project planning stage. For example, one project relying heavily on volunteer input did not include a budget for volunteer expenses; another working with children created only one project officer post which means it is unable to deliver its work as planned due to safeguarding issues.

In other cases, projects were based on incorrect assumptions about existing / baseline levels of use, particularly about the amount of time it would take to support volunteers and develop partnerships, and simply about the applicability of their approach for their target audience “... *the public have also held up some of our targets as we received petitions regarding some of the major works we were planning on carrying out...*”.

In contrast, when they get it right, projects talk in the following ways about their work “... *we were established providers of volunteering and other opportunities to access the natural environment, so feel we have been able to consult thoroughly and understand what was wanted by the community beforehand; we were then in a position to deliver it quickly, well and for good value because we had the contacts and resources ...*”; “... *being sensitive to each community’s psychological and cultural map – speak the language they understand and find the thing that will appeal to them ...*”.

This final quote helps reinforce the important point that a ‘state of readiness’ does not simply equate to previous experience of the kind of work in question. It is as much about a good understanding of, and empathy with, the local area, its residents and needs; about a well researched project plan; having good systems and procedures in place; a strong and effective partnership in place; and scope to start implementation quickly and efficiently.

**Organisations with a good state of readiness are most able to get a project up and running quickly and to reach out to their target groups – this can include previous experience of working with their target beneficiaries; good local contacts and / or partnership arrangements; well researched project plans based on local consultation; and direct delivery experience on the ground in the project areas.**

**For example:**

- The Campaign for National Parks’ *Mosaic* project has built on the organisation’s previous work with minority ethnic communities, which also established a need for the Access to Nature project, providing a firm foundation and good links for their current work.

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**Footnote 1** Unless otherwise stated, all unattributed quotes in this report are taken from the on line survey of grantees; the responses to this survey were all anonymous.



- The *Discovering Nature* project at Lawrence Weston Community Farm has been successful because the woodland is within the Farm curtilage where there are well established links with the local community, and the project was based on an expressed need and what is known of that local community.

## Organisational alignment

For some organisations Access to Nature has afforded the opportunity to extend their existing work into new audiences, or to work with their existing clients in a new environment. This does however mean something of a change of direction for some and examples exist where this has created internal tension and / or a sense of dislocation and lack of support from colleagues and the wider organisation. Ideally such new approaches would first be tested through a programme such as Access to Nature prior to embedding the learning across the organisation.

**Projects thrive best when fully supported by the host organisation and where there is a clear link to overarching organisational goals.**

**For example:**

- The Sensory Trust and LEAF (Linking Education And Farming) are working together on the flagship *Let Nature Feed Your Senses* project and there is a good synergy between the project and both organisations' strategic objectives – it provides them with the opportunity to deliver directly on the ground in a way that reflects their missions and overall goals.
- Warwickshire Wildlife Trust's *Sowe Valley Project* is aligned well with the principles of the Living Landscape approach, adopted nationally by the Wildlife Trusts, which works across landscape areas (in this case a river corridor) rather than just the individual sites / nature reserves under the Trust's management. This alignment has meant good levels of ownership from internal managers and delivery staff good strategic and delivery engagement from key partners (Coventry City Council and the Environment Agency).

## 2.1.3 Internal management

### Steering Groups

It can be the case that organisations regard Steering Groups as something of a necessary evil, sometimes simply a funder's requirement to demonstrate some form of local accountability, governance or consultation. There is no doubt that setting up and supporting a Steering Group can take time and resources, and some projects have found that this investment has not been worthwhile. What is clear however is that a well functioning Steering Group, with clear terms of reference around the cornerstones of accountability, governance and consultation, and with the right people involved, adds considerable value to projects, not the least in terms of helping solve problems in creative ways.

**Steering Groups with a clear purpose and function provide diversity of experience and expertise to projects to supplement internal organisational knowledge.**

### For example:

- The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire's *Great Outdoors Project* is benefiting significantly from the strategic overview provided by its Steering Group. In its first year the Group was bogged down in operational matters and as a result was not as effective as it could be. Its terms of reference were reviewed, day to day management was co-ordinated by a new Working Group, and new, key individuals were recruited. The result is a Steering Group that effectively informs and enhances the project.
- For the *People and the Dales* project from Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust the Steering Group has added value to the project by bringing together people who offer a range of perspectives and help keep the team focused on its outcomes.

## Systems and support

Significantly, the existence of skilled management and support staff within the host organisation, who can focus on project reporting and administration, free up the delivery staff to get on with the project. Where there are existing systems in place, there is less use of precious project resources in developing and testing new approaches. There is some concern in places that project delivery staff – usually employed for their skills in engaging hard to reach groups and / or knowledge of the natural environment – are being relied on for project management, administration and reporting tasks that are somewhat outside their remit and sometimes their skills / experience base. For example, “...hardly enough time for me to deliver the project let alone all that goes with it i.e. claims, reports, meetings, evaluations..”.

At the session with Project Board and Independent Grant Panel members in February 2011, there was general agreement that there is a culture of minimising management and administration costs in funding applications. It is felt that this reflects a historic requirement by funders to see project administration costs minimised. Access to Nature Lead Advisers confirm that this was the steer given to applicants at times. However the evidence to date is suggesting that such deliberate under resourcing of project management and administration can be counter-productive.

**Where organisations have, or can put into place, an effective management infrastructure and systems, there are significant knock on benefits for project delivery.**

### For example:

- The Woodland Trust's *Woodland Communities* project reports a strong management structure and supportive line management which has enabled the project lead to focus energy effectively towards delivery.
- Lancashire Wildlife Trust's *Wealth of Wildlife* project in Morecambe Bay notes that internal stability and experience of delivering engagement projects, coupled with effective infrastructure and supportive line management, has enabled the project to move at a good pace and has allowed good partnerships to be developed with delivery partners who are confident in the Trust's leadership.

## Funding and resources

There is general point to consider here about the degree to which projects are adequately resourced overall via their Access to Nature grant. This is not however a clear picture: there are no real patterns of evidence, or of consistency of experiences, and it is an area littered with contradictions.

Overall, evidence from the evaluation reports completed to date does suggest that the majority of projects feel adequately resourced. It is also the view of the Lead Advisers that the level of funding made available through Access to Nature is regarded as generous, particularly by some of the smaller organisation that have not previously had access to financial support of this scale.

Elsewhere however other resourcing issues have been identified. Some projects cite the reporting and administration requirements as overly burdensome and therefore time intensive and a distraction from delivery; there are project managers with an enormous and multi faceted work remit for large and complex projects; individual project officers overwhelmed by the volume of management and delivery tasks for which they are responsible; and others where they are the victims of their own success where demand is exceeding the capacity to respond. “ *... limited resources .. only one project officer to deliver the whole project ...*”; “ *.. with regard to setting up and Elder and Youth Council this has been difficult as not originally budgeted for ...*”; “ *..money wasn't allocated to the right places at the beginning so there needs to be some flexibility with the budgets ..*”. Some projects have reviewed their work plans as a result, some have re-distributed workloads or recruited volunteers for some core delivery tasks, and others carry on regardless.

This picture is clearly difficult to unpick and therefore to draw conclusions. It could be the case that some organisations did not look properly at what their proposals entailed and did not adequately calculate the staffing resource it would take to deliver that work. For others a lack of experience in engagement work could be at the root of poor assumptions about how much time it would take to deliver their projects. There has also been some criticism that the level of programme reporting requirements was not made clear and could therefore not be budgeted for adequately.

The issue of funding cannot be examined without reference to the prevailing economic climate. A third of project survey respondents have been affected by financial cuts and reorganisations / restructuring. There are direct impacts in terms of difficulties securing matched funding, and in accessing partnership commitment and the resource that brings to a project, plus financial difficulties for the community groups some projects are trying to engage: “ *.. funding cuts to support services and other local organisations have created additional challenges ....*”; “ *.. funding cuts have affected many of the community groups we work with...*”; “ *economic downturn has meant additional funding for the project has been hard to come by...*”. Some projects have had to re-negotiate their Access to Nature grant percentage to take account of difficulties in securing match funding, some have had to re-think aspects of their project plans.

**Effective project delivery relies on the availability of adequate funding and resourcing.**

**For example:**

- The *Walk on the Wildside* partnership project between Wild Things, Groundwork Greater Nottingham and the Castle Cavendish Foundation in Nottingham is an adequately resourced project where clear roles and responsibilities for delivery and management tasks have been agreed across the partner organisations, utilising their relative strengths.



- Projects including *Treewise*, *Call of the Wild* and *Open Spaces*, *Open Minds* all comment that they have had sufficient resources to run their project and deliver their work.

## 2.1.4 Partnership working

Access to Nature projects have developed a variety of partnerships, and indeed have interpreted the term 'partnership' in different ways.

Partnership is in fact a very specific form of collaboration and a genuine partnership typically shows the following characteristics:

- Some area of responsibility or activity over which it has the power to make its own decisions
- A requirement for strategic, political or practical reasons for decisions to be made jointly by the partners
- Joint control over some resources (of whatever kind)
- A preference for an inclusive and consensual approach to decision making<sup>2</sup>

It is difficult to know the extent to which these features are evident across Access to Nature project partnerships, because there are no means for the kind of detailed assessment this would require. However, what is clear is that those arrangements described as partnerships that work well have some aspects in common – a relatively small number of organisations described as partners, and where each organisation has a clearly defined role and contributes towards a shared goal. Ideally they would also have been involved in developing the original proposal to ensure a real sense of ownership of the outcomes. For instance, “ .. *the partnership works extremely well and is being recognised as a successful way of working; it has worked as the partners are committed members of the group working to move the project forward...*”.

However, this is not universally representative of the situation with regard to Access to Nature project partnerships (which were a programme funding requirement). The effectiveness of partnerships is not accidental; they require an investment of resources if they are to add real value to the project. In some instances there is evidence to suggest that this investment has not been made, or that there has not been enough commitment to partnership working by the project host. It is also likely that some organisations have not been able to identify how a partnership would add any value to their work. Other difficulties exist for those few projects who now find that they are in a position of having to try and balance the project goals with partner priorities, which can be an uncomfortable tension.

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**Footnote 2** Groups for Growth, 2005, Make Partnership Work, Huddersfield Pride Ltd, Huddersfield

In a few cases there have been significant problems in partnership working due to incorrect assumptions or information about what a partner would bring to the table. For example, two organisations have made it clear that their partner has not brought the access to their target beneficiary group that they anticipated, creating significant difficulties in achieving targets and outcomes. It is unclear why this discord has taken place, but in each instance it has resulted in significant learning for the lead organisation in how to build delivery partnerships in the future.

A widespread issue has been how the economic climate has impacted on partnerships; for example, reorganisations have led to the loss of key delivery partner posts; funding cuts have resulted in the re-prioritisation of workloads within partner organisations; key personnel have been made redundant so contacts have been lost in partner agencies. The knock-on effects are wide ranging and projects have had to re-think their approach to partnership in some instances. Elsewhere there is a sense they have had to start from scratch to create workable partnerships, which has had an unplanned impact on their resources.

There are then significant benefits attributable to a partnership approach. Given the unusual nature of this programme – linking two very specialist areas of expertise (working with hard to reach groups and accessing the natural environment) – there is a valid argument that projects should be based on a partnership.

**Developing good partnerships requires an investment of time but benefits the project by providing an understanding of beneficiary groups and / or the local area; adding specific areas of expertise to the project; providing client referrals; delivering specialist aspects of the project.**

**For example:**

- *Wheely Natural*, a project from Foresight (North East Lincolnshire) Ltd, reports that partnership working has been very important to the success of their work. This is particularly true of health providers, mainly physiotherapy, who not only make referrals but also now help deliver some of their cycling sessions.
- Salisbury International Arts Festival's *The Nature of Art in Wessex* project has formed good working relationships with its partners and this has meant that they have gradually taken over some project management tasks. In Hollybank Woods, for example, the Friends helped to write funding bids, made enquiries with local land owners and council representatives, led nature walks at their site, publicised the Open Day and managed the Open Day infrastructure.

## 2.1.5 Learning about project management for future programmes

The learning about project management to date suggests a number of areas of consideration for future funding programmes:

- Applicants should be able to demonstrate that they are in a position to deliver their project as planned – for example, they should have a clear track record across all the required areas of expertise as demanded by the programme goals, or should have a demonstrable partnership in place that ensures that all of the relevant expertise is in place; there should be a well researched project plan with systems established to enable implementation to take place; and this should be clearly evidenced within their application.
- Applicants should be required to demonstrate how the proposed project complements their organisation's existing work and how it aligns and / or supports its vision and goals.
- Programme guidance should recommend the formation of project Steering Groups; Steering Groups should have clear terms of reference and add value to any project.
- Programme guidance should be clear about the administration and reporting requirements on funded projects; applicants should be encouraged to include sufficient project management and administration costs in their budgets; assessors should make judgements about whether organisations have included enough resources (in terms of time, money, and skills and capacity) to ensure effective delivery on the ground.
- Assessments should consider whether projects have calculated their resource / funding needs correctly; there should be some flexibility in the funding to be able to respond to changing / unexpected circumstances, for example through a contingency fund allocated to each project.
- Programme applicants should be able to demonstrate they have partnerships in place; this should be coupled with an explanation of why the particular partners were selected and how they add value to the proposed project; where possible, partners should be involved in the preparation of the proposal.

## 2.2 Project methods, approach and reach

### 2.2.1 Introduction

This section focuses on the methods and approaches projects are applying, and the success they are having in reaching their target beneficiaries as a result. It is not the intention to list all of the specific approaches here but instead to highlight the learning projects have identified, with illustrations from their application in practice.

It should also be noted that more detailed information about methods for engaging children and young people, minority ethnic communities, people with enduring mental health problems, and volunteers are included in the Early Findings Papers produced by Icarus in October 2011.<sup>3</sup>

### 2.2.2 Learning about methods and approaches

#### Reaching and communicating with beneficiary groups

Projects are most successful in reaching out to their beneficiary groups when they have a track record of working with that group and / or have good contacts with other organisations that do, or when they invest in understanding and meeting those groups on their own 'territory'; " .. *work through existing outreach groups specialising in that demographic ...*" In contrast, a minority of projects do appear to think that their great project idea is sufficient draw and have as a result not invested sufficiently in, or understood how, to reach their intended beneficiaries – that the problem lies with that audience rather than anything they have or have not done.

#### **Use established networks and local contacts to reach groups.**

**For example:** *Fryston Woods Access and Improvement Project* is a project from Castleford Heritage Trust. Because the Trust has done a lot of work in the area already and has a good reputation, it has been able to build on its previous work and contacts. Partnership working has also been key to this and each partner organisation brings its own links into the community, from schools to voluntary groups, the bowling club and churches.

#### **Find the method of communication that is right for the beneficiary group.**

**For example:** It has been the experience of Northampton Borough Council's *Change of Scene* project that leaflets and posters about their work are of little interest to their target group of young people from deprived estates. In contrast, social networking has worked well and has been a great way to interact with people who would not normally get involved in a project like this, and to get rapid two way feedback about the project and its activities.

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**Footnote 3** See [www.naturalengland/accesstonature](http://www.naturalengland/accesstonature)



## Understanding the beneficiary groups

The examples below illustrate the importance of understanding what will motivate people to become involved in a project and recognising that different people will have different motivations. In a programme like Access to Nature this requires a level of sophistication in targeting that some organisations will not have previously experienced. For instance, examples exist where all minority ethnic communities have been targeted by one approach that does little to reflect their immensely differing cultural experiences of, and relationship to, the natural environment. It does seem to be such an obvious point, but what projects deliver must be of interest and relevant to the people they want to work with; *“..don't make assumptions about why people may not access green spaces as the reasons can be varied and sometimes historical or deep rooted...”*.

This requires organisations to think in different kinds of ways – the evidence suggests that some have been able to do this well while others have a tendency to deliver in the way they always have with the expectation that this will attract their intended audience. In other cases, such a focused approach has required an unexpected level of resourcing and commitment. Using a ‘hook’ that is not explicitly about the natural environment has worked for some projects, but there is a recognition that it is sometimes hard to then bring the project back around to its intended agenda – such an approach needs to be used with caution; *“...the natural environment can be a turn off for some people – often activities are better attended if marketed slightly differently, such as fun days, healthy walks etc ...”*. It will be particularly interesting to return to this in the remaining years of the Access to Nature programme, and to explore in more detail the approaches to targeting and the level of sophistication organisations have had to pursue.

### **Do focused work with specific target groups that is tailored to their needs.**

**For example:** The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire’s *Great Outdoors Project* spends the first three months of each year in detailed consultation with the target beneficiary groups and existing users for their proposed site. The result is a detailed nine month implementation plan that is based on expressed needs and wants. This has required the Trust to think differently and to move away from assuming that the ‘hook’ for people’s involvement is always wildlife or walking interests and to think laterally about what will get people involved and interested in their work.

### **Understand the target groups.**

**For example:** Imayla’s *Getting Out There!* project has been able to build on the organisation’s existing track record of working with young people, families and community groups from BME communities. They have adapted their activities to reflect the interests and experience of participants and have, for example, used the idea that young people often need a hook like music, film making or bushcraft to draw them into a rural environment.

### **Be prepared to respectfully challenge people’s perceptions.**

**For example:** The Field Studies Council *Vision South West* project provides residential experiences for children and young people with visual impairment, followed by youth work in their own communities. A significant challenge has been overcoming parents’ fears about whether this is suitable for their children, coupled with their anxieties about letting them go away independently. To allay such fears a taster day was held for potential project participants, their siblings and parents, as a stepping stone to give parents confidence about the residential courses and to challenge their perceptions of what their offspring can do.

**Consider using a ‘hook’ that is not initially or explicitly about the natural environment.**

**For example:** The National Trust’s *South Birmingham Green Academies* project has run ‘Pizza and Planet’ evenings with young people. Using the treat of a pizza, the project shows David Attenborough films to then spark debate about environmental issues.

## The organisational mindset

Working with new kinds of people or in different kinds of settings takes a different approach from organisations, together with a willingness to reflect on and learn from their experiences as the project progresses. While evidence would suggest that many projects understand this principle, there are some for which this is a difficult concept to come to terms with – their traditional audiences have engaged well with them and there is little appreciation that this will not always be the case and that different approaches are required for different kinds of people; “*..get as much support from expert groups as you can and design activities which are both fun and informative..*”; “*...think laterally devise as many different means of interpreting and experiencing the outdoors as possible, not just the easy, obvious ones ...*”.

**Have a flexible and adaptable approach.**

**For example:** Luton Council of Faiths’ *Faith Woodlands Communities* project has had to move away from the fixed ideas it had at the start about what they would need to ‘explain’ to people as they experienced the woods. The team has evolved their thinking about this so that now they are allowing people to simply experience the woods without introducing too much new information in the first instance; they now recognise the value in providing opportunities for unstructured exploration. This has been possible because of the willingness of the staff to talk to people, listen to what they have to say about their experience, and then adjust their response and their approach accordingly.

**Bring in specialists to help where required.**

**For example:** *Holy Trinity Church* in the West Midlands have Access to Nature funding to create new wildlife habitats in the churchyard and to engage local children and residents in learning about nature. The church is a community focused organisation with little in the way of previous environmental knowledge and has had to “*grow their own expertise*”. Part of this has involved bringing in wildlife experts who support the learning for local people, and who have helped design activities to study the wildlife and habitats.

## About the activities on offer

It is clear that many organisations have travelled along something of a journey before understanding the kinds of approaches they should take and that will work for their target beneficiaries; “*..take the time to chat to them and see things from their point of view – find common ground and work from there..*”.

One of the difficulties that projects face is the extent to which they are already pushing individuals’ boundaries given the spirit of Access to Nature; people who have not previously accessed the natural environment are being encouraged and enabled to do so. The size of the steps people are willing to take in engaging with the natural environment, the new experiences they are willing and able to accept, and their receptiveness to new environments all have a bearing on what projects can offer; “*...we have substantial areas of deprivation .. there is a history of non engagement ...breaking down these barriers has been most*

*challenging...". As a consequence, some have found their original ideas too ambitious and have had to adapt their approach accordingly. Others have used the idea of tasters and / or doorstep activities as first steps; "...it is important to provide activities on the doorstep to build rapport and a relationship.. our activities on estates were well attended by our target groups and we then immediately organised off estate activities which weren't so well attended ... we will now build up relationships again .....*". What is clear is that this is a much more complex area than it might first appear.

#### **Use taster sessions to illustrate what a project event / activity will be like.**

**For example:** Forest of Avon Trust's *Natural Connections* project has used taster sessions, particularly with schools that have not been in a position to commit to more involved participation in the project. Forest School sessions have been particularly successful in revealing the potential benefits of group work involving play and learning in a woodland setting.

#### **Use multiple strands of activity to appeal to different audiences.**

**For example:** The Ipswich *HABITAT* project from Community Service Volunteers which is engaging people of all ages with diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds has found it helpful to offer a range of activities – from bonfires to storytelling to bird watching, for example.

#### **Run open events to generate interest in a project's work.**

**For example:** *Do It Like You Do It On The Discovery Farm* is a Sunderland Training and Education Farm project. It has used family fun events as a means of engaging people, initially on a superficial level. The events, coupled with a change of language away from 'conservation' and towards 'growing, cooking, planting etc' have proved very effective in getting local people to visit the farm, while providing the 'hook' to promote the training courses and development opportunities available through the project.

#### **Run family events to attract children in the first instance and who will then bring their families along.**

**For example:** Spectrum Medina Housing Association's *Natural Wight* project have used general family events to attract young children and in doing so attract their parents and grandparents too.

#### **Work with children through schools.**

**For example:** Lancashire Wildlife Trust's *Wealth of Wildlife* project discovered that the lack of knowledge among children about the Morecambe Bay marine environment and wildlife was high. To make the best use of outdoor learning opportunities for children the project devised pre-visit sessions, delivered in schools, taking with them underwater scenes and wildlife that the children would encounter when they made their outdoor visit. The project also ensures the input to the children was relevant to their experience, an example being a focus on very practical activities or workshops about the impact of litter on marine and coastal wildlife.

## Sustaining engagement

One area where many projects are identifying difficulties is that of recruiting volunteers and sustaining engagement, particularly among their target groups; “..it has been challenging to attract local people to take part in volunteering activities...”; “...retaining volunteers has been quite a challenge...”. This is particularly true where there was an original expectation that project participants would over time move into a volunteering role. There is a realisation for some that their original assumptions were unrealistic or unworkable – for example, creating networks of volunteers and / or voluntary groups over large geographical areas, or expecting volunteers to want to do physical improvement tasks outside of their very local area – or simply that this was a task that takes a lot more time and specialist support than anticipated.

The examples here demonstrate how important it is that there is flexibility in the volunteering ‘offer’, that the opportunities are realistic and match potential volunteers’ expectations, and equally they emphasise that volunteering support is simply very time consuming.

### **Be aware that it takes significant investment to encourage people to move from being project beneficiaries to project volunteers, particularly those from hard to reach groups; reflect individuals’ motivations for becoming involved.**

**For example:** The Ipswich *HABITAT* project has reflected that one of the biggest challenges lies in progressing people that are ‘hard to reach’ from one off experiences through to regular engagement and volunteering. They have suggested that this is probably easier if a project is focused on one site and it is the community around that site that the project is targeting. However, it can be particularly difficult when working across sites.

### **Offer a range of volunteering opportunities to attract a variety of people.**

**For example:** The Sensory Trust and LEAF’s *Let Nature Feed Your Senses* is a national, flagship project that runs sensory rich visits to farms. The original intention was to create a team of voluntary Community Connectors who would network with groups from the target beneficiaries and to arrange visits for them with farmers. In practice an overly broad job description and little capacity for face to face support had a negative impact on volunteer recruitment and retention, with significant knock-on effects for the project staff and their delivery. The focus has now switched to providing very specific volunteering opportunities – such as office based work creating activity bags – where potential volunteers can easily understand what the task is and what time commitment is required of them. This reflects the project understanding that different kinds of people want differing volunteering opportunities, and will be able offer a wide ranging level of commitment.

### **Provide good levels of support for volunteers and make them feel part of a team.**

**For example:** *VisitWoods* is another national, flagship project, hosted by The Woodland Trust and has faced difficulties in retaining volunteers because they are managed from a distance. This is a task that is taking a lot more resource than anticipated but remains critical to the success of the project. As a result the project has thought carefully about how best to support its volunteer team and is offering small scale group support; successfully using Facebook as a medium for communication and skill sharing; engaging experienced volunteers in hosting regional get-togethers which should add to the sense of being part of a team; providing flexibility in the volunteering ‘offer’; re-structuring complex roles into more manageable chunks; ensuring clarity about expectations. Crucially, *VisitWoods* has come to realise that a ‘one size fits all’ approach is not effective.



## 2.2.3 Project success in reaching beneficiary groups

The extent to which projects have reached their beneficiary groups is inextricably linked to the learning about methods highlighted above. Those which have applied themselves to the task effectively, and reflect the good practice messages, have been largely successful in reaching their beneficiaries. These beneficiaries are wide ranging across the Access to Nature priorities and include:

- Visually impaired young people
- People in deprived areas
- People on low incomes with lack of access to green space
- People with extra support needs
- People with long term health needs
- Minority ethnic communities
- Long term unemployed
- Children
- People with limited mobility
- Travellers and Gypsies

The work of some projects is highly targeted to one beneficiary group but most work with two or more. Others state they work with local residents, in deprived wards for example, which in itself will include wide ranging subsets of people that will require different engagement approaches.

It is very positive that **most projects report that they are making good progress reaching their target beneficiaries**. It is not always an easy process and projects have had to think laterally about how best to extend their reach to groups, and have had to overcome lethargy borne out of long periods of non engagement in some communities. Some projects note the degree to which this kind of targeting is more resource intensive than they expected “*..it takes more time to introduce and engage them ...*”, and the numbers engaged are lower than expected “*.. struggling getting the numbers of beneficiaries involved that we had hoped...*”. For others there have been difficulties reaching some specific groups, including pupils’ families, children with disabilities, minority ethnic communities, and young people with disabilities.

An examination of projections against the programme’s numeric targets also highlights how projects are cumulatively out-performing the overall goals. There is only one area that is doing less well, and that is target 2b – 50,000 volunteers will have a new opportunity to actively participate in training and development programmes, gaining new skills by 2014 – where the most recent figures track this figure at 28,000.

However, while there is no reason to believe that projects are deliberately providing misleading information about the extent of their reach, there are some concerns about the reliability and robustness of some of that information given the absence of consistent data collection methods. There is no doubt that monitoring of beneficiary data is new to many of the funded organisations, that the reporting mechanism is somewhat unwieldy, and that collecting relevant data is in itself not always an easy process. It is also the case that the requirement to report on targets can create a tension between the quality and quantity of engagement. It is therefore prudent to assume that there are margins of error in the statistics, the full extent of which is unknown.

## 2.2.4 Learning about project methods, approach and reach

What the information in this section of the report tells us is that a programme like Access to Nature is entering new territory and therefore requires the funded projects to do the same. The evidence suggests that there is significant learning about what works and what does not in this marriage of the natural environment and engaging hard to reach groups, and this knowledge should be underpin any similarly focused future funding programme:

- There should be recognition of the degree to which engaging hard to reach groups is resource intensive, particularly where the focus is on sustaining involvement rather than one off activities or events with those groups
- The use of numeric targets are a distraction and should be balanced with / replaced by a requirement for quality engagement
- Projects need to have the capacity to be 'fleet of foot' to respond to opportunities as they arise; this requires flexibility to make minor changes to their project plans as a result without permission
- The assessment process should consider the applicant's understanding of, or their track record with, the target groups
- Projects should be encouraged to create milestones that reflect the time it may take to generate meaningful engagement with their target beneficiaries
- There should be clarity about the target groups from the outset, plus guidance about how they can be monitored and reported, where this is the intention

# 2.3 Project impacts

## 2.3.1 Introduction

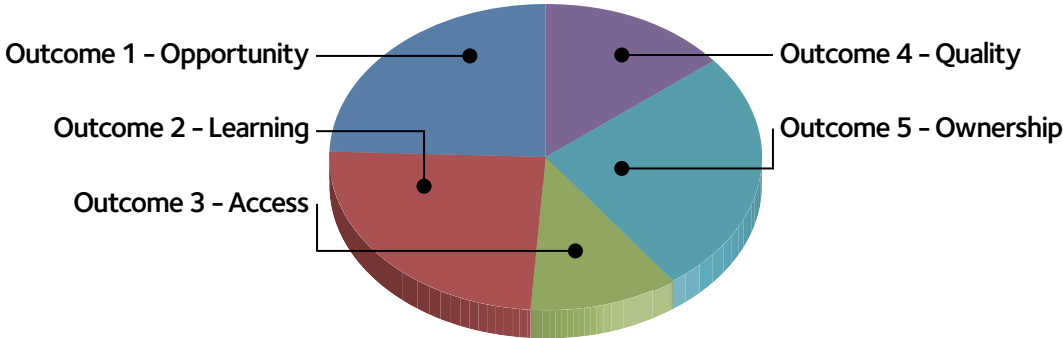
Earlier Access to Nature evaluation reports have not been able to reflect on progress against the programme outcomes in any great detail, due to the lack of evidence available. At this stage however, there are more projects that are some way into their delivery period, and are therefore generating interim evaluation reports; there is now an opportunity to start seeing what impact the programme is having, and the extent to which it is achieving what it set out to do. However, it is worth noting that there is more evidence on the questions of project management and approaches and methods at this stage. What follows here on impact will grow with successive evaluation reports as more evidence about the changes projects have brought about becomes available. Only then will it be possible to reach firm conclusions about the impact of the programme as a whole, rather than of individual projects.

However, **the significant headline finding on outcomes is that nearly 90% of projects say they are on track or exceeding expectations with regard to achieving their outcomes – that is, the vast majority are expecting to bring about the changes they envisaged through their work.**

Each of the five Access to Nature outcomes is reviewed separately in this part of the report, with a 'fact file' introduction that provides an overview of how it fits into the programme overall, while describing how projects have interpreted and applied it in their work. This is followed by more detail to demonstrate what progress is being made, with project examples illustrating impacts on the ground.

An interesting starting point is the spread of outcomes across the projects – the table below illustrates the proportion of projects that have one or more SMART outcome for each of the Access to Nature outcomes. All projects were required to link to outcome five, and the two next most popular outcomes are one and two around opportunity and learning. It is not surprising that the two least popular outcomes are those that are less explicitly focused on engagement with hard to reach groups – access and quality.

**Table 3:** The distribution of Access to Nature outcomes across projects



## 2.3.2 Access to Nature Outcome 1

### Fact file: Access to Nature Outcome 1

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

109 projects have one or more SMART outcome that relate to this Access to Nature outcome.

**Example project SMART outcomes that relate to this Access to Nature outcome:**

- Individuals from groups that are under-represented in the countryside (young people, elderly people, BME communities, urban disadvantaged, socially / economically disadvantaged, physically disabled and people with mental health difficulties) will report that they have the skills and confidence to return to the Yorkshire Dales with their friends and family.
- Residents of deprived wards in Hull City will be able to identify ways in which they have positively experienced their natural environment.
- People from the target communities and children from target schools report increased knowledge, appreciation and enjoyment of the canal environment.

**Target** – at least 1 million people to have improved opportunities to actively experience and enjoy the natural environment.

**Target progress** – 257,059 people have improved opportunities (December 2011)<sup>4</sup>

**Example of project activities contributing towards this outcome:**

- Cycling programmes
- Nature walks
- Family events
- Allotments
- Outdoor sports
- Craft and art programmes
- Wild play

**Evidence against this outcome:**

About half of projects<sup>5</sup> have provided good evidence of their progress on this outcome. Evidence for 'improved opportunities' is easy to record by listing the activities they have completed. However projects have been encouraged to interpret this outcome by considering the extent to which the opportunity offers positive experiences.

**Footnote 4** These figures reflect reporting from projects against targets – weaknesses in the accuracies of the reporting system have been flagged up in earlier Access to Nature evaluation reports.

**Footnote 5** This refers to the projects that have submitted evaluation reports.



The fact that evidence for this outcome is not as good as it could be is reflected in what follows here; there is a tendency for projects to list their activities and targets against this outcome since 'opportunity' is a hard concept against which to develop indicators and thereafter to capture evidence. There are of course exceptions to this and some good evidence has been provided by projects including Urban Explorers (West Midlands), People and the Dales (Yorkshire and Humberside) and Discovery Quest (East of England). However, it is still important to note that **the majority of projects report good progress against this outcome and that the relevant target is exceeding expectations.**

Variety is the key word when examining this outcome; such broad wording has led to different interpretations within SMART outcomes and project activities alike. **There is evidence of the changes the programme is achieving with regard to increasing opportunity across several themes:**

- Building participants' self confidence and self esteem
- Using fun experiences and activities to bring families together
- Creating a connection to the natural environment
- Positive and transformative experiences in the natural environment
- Creating a better understanding of and commitment to the natural environment

One project example has been selected to illustrate each of these themes below.

#### **Building participants' self confidence and self esteem.**

**For example:** *Call of the Wild* is a project being run with the Circle of Life Rediscovery Community Interest Company in the South East. The project has been able to demonstrate a number of benefits for the young Travellers it has engaged in terms of learning new things, enjoying practical activities (such as skinning a rabbit, bow making and tool making), and enjoying being creative. Such experiences have also had an effect on young people's self esteem and self confidence – for example, *"it has made me more confident in meeting new people because I've gone through life making friends and stuff but I have found that hard, but it's such a positive environment here that I have found it a lot easier just to be myself"*. College staff who accompany the young people have also seen real benefits; *"several of the students have become more engaged in the college work and have expressed a better understanding of the need to achieve; there is a strong bond amongst these students and levels of maturity have increased"*.

#### **Using fun experiences and activities to bring families together.**

**For example:** Yorkshire Wildlife Trust's *Creating a Living Landscape in Hull* is providing fun activities for its beneficiary groups – bug hunting, pond dipping and survival skills are all particularly popular. However, one of the benefits identified in family activities specifically, is the opportunity that this provides for those families to spend time together doing something enjoyable.

#### **Creating a connection to the natural environment.**

**For example:** The RSPB's *Explore Moor* project provides exciting outdoor activities for young people from schools and community groups in Carlisle and the surrounding area on the Geltsdale Nature Reserve. Their evidence shows how children who have not previously accessed the moorland are engaging with the experience and creating a connection to the natural environment. In the words of two pupils; *"the visit made me feel I should get outside more"* and *"I enjoyed looking at the giant landscape because it is neat with lots of greenery, filled with lots of nature – I liked the view of the countryside and the peace of the valley"*.

### The positive and transformative experiences of the natural environment.

**For example:** *Vision South West* is a project under the auspices of the Field Studies Council that provides residential experiences for children and young people with visual impairment. One of the course participants was a young woman, aged 12. Initially, she was nervous about going away on her own, particularly since she did not know anyone else who would be there. Her parents were delighted to discover she had a great time and had been interested in everything she had done – which was somewhat different to her usual fixations with Facebook and make up! They overheard her talking to a visually impaired friend, explaining how good it had been, and now her friend wants to come on the next course.

### Promoting a deeper understanding of and commitment to the natural environment.

**For example:** Staff at the *HABITAT* project have spoken of one individual who has developed a somewhat unexpected and deep level of commitment to the natural environment. Her interest was sparked at a Christmas event when she overheard the co-ordinator talking about volunteer opportunities. She was interested to know more and started to get actively involved; *“she has gone from someone with no experience of coming out and doing conservation work to one of our most committed volunteers – she didn’t know she lived on the edge of a nature reserve and now she gives her time to help look after it”*.

These examples offer some insight into the impacts and changes Access to Nature projects can bring about, for children and young people, for adults and for families. They include life affirming stories that help create a real understanding of what Access to Nature is all about. However, evidence on this outcome is not always good because of its broad description, while several projects have quite rightly noted that they will only be able to effectively report against it some way down the line. Typically these projects are seeking to influence long term behavioural change and / or achieve physical and mental health benefits, for example. The longitudinal tracking these kinds of assessments require is complex and beyond the scope of many Access to Nature projects; data will however be available from two of the flagship projects in the future which it is hoped will provide more empirical evidence to support the testimonials and qualitative information that currently exists.

## 2.3.3 Access to Nature Outcome 2

### Fact file: Access to Nature Outcome 2

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

109 projects have one or more SMART outcome that relate to this Access to Nature outcome.

#### Example project SMART outcomes that relate to this Access to Nature outcome:

- Young people will identify new learning about their natural environment and will link this to other parts of the National Curriculum.
- Volunteers will have acquired skills and knowledge to assist with and lead play sessions for children in the natural environment.
- Teachers will report a greater capacity and confidence to deliver lessons in the outdoor classroom.
- Young people from the Swale and Shepway areas identified at being at risk of NEET (not in education, employment, or training) will gain accredited skills and knowledge in respect of the natural environment.
- Participants in the arts activities in the natural environment will report they have learnt new skills.

**Targets - 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.

**Target progress – Target 2a** – 117,409; **Target 2b** – 14,736 (December 2011)

#### Example of project activities contributing towards this outcome:

- |   |                         |
|---|-------------------------|
| • Formal / accredited training                            | • Planting              |
| • Surveying skills  | • Identification skills |
| • Skills training (e.g. fencing, hedge laying, first aid) | • Habitat creation      |
|   | • Forest Schools        |
|   | • Nature walks          |

#### Evidence against this outcome:

Over half of projects have provided good evidence of their progress on this outcome. However, that for informal learning is weaker and to some degree the learning is implied from participation in an activity rather than being formally measured in some way.

There are two complementary but quite different aspects to this outcome – there is the formal learning that relates to target 2b and that which is more informal and is reflected in 2a. Evidence against formal learning is relatively easy to gather; for example, *Urban Explorers* (West Midlands) have trained 12 volunteers, five of whom have gone on to run their own outdoor play sessions; 13 young people have gained indoor climbing wall qualifications and 11 volunteers have been trained as activity leaders through the *Change of Scene* (East Midlands) project; *Telford Access to Nature* (West Midlands) report that 29 volunteers and 19 young people have gained OCN qualifications.

Evidence for informal learning is on occasion less well formed. Narrative in a minority of the evaluation reports implies that assumptions are being made that people learn simply by being in the natural environment without any kind of learning input; for example, one report evidencing outcome 2 states “*the access to the woodland meant that over 5000 people have been able to visit since it opened*”. It is questionable whether such projects should have included a SMART outcome on learning, they are unable to effectively evidence the learning that is taking place, and the target data they are providing through quarterly reports must have a question mark over it. Elsewhere, projects have been able to list the learning they believe is taking place, but they have not always been able to evidence it – for example, just because a plant identification course has been run it does not necessarily follow that every participant learnt something; there is a need for feedback to confirm this has actually happened.

The **majority of projects state that they are making some or good progress against this outcome. Target 2a is being exceeded, but 2b is under performing.** While it is not possible to fully understand why this is the case, there is evidence of several factors that appear to have an influence; projects finding it harder to recruit and retain volunteers than expected; difficulties encountered by several projects in selecting the most appropriate accreditation; and at least one project has had problems finding a suitable provider to run its accredited training courses through. This suggests that working with volunteers from the Access to Nature target groups can be more challenging and require different approaches to how organisations have previously worked. A range of awarding bodies are part of this picture – including NVQ, OCN, John Muir, Apprenticeships, RSPB, City and Guilds, Mountain Leader Training Board and the British Canoe Union, for example – and it is clear that it can be something of a challenge finding the accreditation that is fit for purpose and appropriate for the target group. The John Muir Award is one that a number of projects have found most appropriate, and *Vision South West* for example says it has helped provide a structure to their learning and local activity.

It has been possible to identify that **the impact of the learning that is taking place through Access to Nature projects is across the following areas**, each one of which is illustrated by a project example below:

- Training volunteers leads to employment
- Accreditation as ‘icing on the cake’ for volunteers
- Informal learning providing new skills
- Building local capacity by training volunteers
- Cascading learning
- Using engagement with nature as an alternative learning environment
- Promoting a deeper understanding of the natural environment



### Training volunteers leads to employment.

**For example:** *Walk on the Wildside* is a partnership project between Wild Things, Groundwork Greater Nottingham and the Castle Cavendish Foundation in Nottingham, and Wild Things recruits volunteers to lead environment education sessions. One volunteer was recruited from the project's beneficiary groups and she attended Forest Schools training; she has now been able to secure employment travelling around the Czech Republic and delivering Forest Schools activities. A second volunteer had worked in the NHS before coming to the project. Her experiences with the project prompted a change of direction in her life and she has now got a job running a community allotment project that focuses on growing and healthy eating.

### Accreditation as 'icing on the cake' for volunteers.

**For example:** *Wheely Natural* in North East Lincolnshire now has a group of trained volunteers, of all ages, who are competent cycle leaders. To be able to offer the 'train the trainer' qualification has been 'the icing on the cake' for many – it has appealed to people because it is a skill development opportunity which is valuable in the current market.

### Informal learning providing new skills.

**For example:** *The Nature of Art in Wessex* is a project run by the Salisbury International Arts Festival that develops local arts projects in the natural environment to run in tandem with the Festival itself. While it has been challenging to find quality arts activities that engage a range of ages and abilities, those participating have learnt new skills that they both use and can be passed on: "I will show my grandchildren how to do it" said a University of the Third Age participant. Each artist who is engaged by the project also produces a Resource Pack to complement their individual project; these feature information about the natural history of the site and step by step instructions to make art inspired by nature. The packs are then left with participant groups who also pass them on to others in their local area, such as teachers, to cascade their learning; they are emailed to other local groups and schools and provided as free web downloads on the festival website.

### Building local capacity by training volunteers.

**For example:** Groundwork West Midlands's *Urban Explorers* project aims to get children under 11 outside playing in their local parks and green spaces. Part of the work is focused on training volunteer play leaders in the skills to deliver outdoor play sessions. During the first part of the project, 12 volunteers have been trained, five of whom have gone on to become regular leaders in Urban Explorers activities, while a further two volunteers have gone on to run play sessions at local events, one as a paid play leader and the other as a volunteer. In this way Groundwork is both building capacity for Urban Explorers and to leave skills within the community once the Access to Nature project funding comes to an end.

### Cascading learning.

**For example:** The *Mosaic project* run by the Council of National Parks trains volunteers known as Community Champions, all of whom are from minority ethnic communities. Providing training in the practicalities of running a group visit (including map reading, health and safety, what to pack), as well as experiencing first-hand the activities on offer in the Parks, provides useful exposure that enables Community Champions to talk with confidence to those in their community about what to expect of a visit. The intention is that Champions then use their links into their own communities to start arranging visits to National Parks – sometimes their first step is to bring family and friends to test and build their confidence. Once relationships are established Community Champions act as a conduit between their communities and the National Parks.

### Using engagement with nature as an alternative learning environment.

**For example:** Lancashire Wildlife Trust's *Wealth of Wildlife* project in Morecambe Bay connects children with the marine environment. Three boys described as very disruptive and behaviourally challenging were helped to learn through practical activities including the creation of underwater scenes with wildlife in the classroom prior to a visit to the coast. This allowed the boys to see the creatures they would be looking for and ask questions without the need for pen and paper. As a result the project says they were engaged on the visit as they were keen to find the creatures – such as crabs – that they had observed in their underwater scenes.

### Promoting a deeper understanding of the natural environment.

**For example:** Scarborough Borough Council's *Dell-ve into Nature* project has good evidence, collected via the on line Survey Monkey tool that educational activities that they have offered are meeting the curriculum requirements of schools. They have been praised for their ability to develop a language about the natural environment that is accessible to children. One teacher commented *"thanks for the morning – it was first class outdoor curriculum provision – you are becoming very skilled at explaining things to children at a level which they can understand and which introduces a new vocabulary – well done and thanks"*.

Learning is undoubtedly an important focus for the majority of Access to Nature projects, although with a differing focus and scope and across a range of subjects, as illustrated by the examples above. In some instances learning is the 'hook' to get people involved in projects, in others it is a somewhat hidden aspect to avoid disengaging beneficiaries. It will be important to keep track of the issue regarding target 2b – which was always forecast to be low – and to provide support to projects in this regard as required.

## 2.3.4 Access to Nature Outcome 3

### Fact file: Access to Nature Outcome 3

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

49 projects have one or more SMART outcome that relate to this Access to Nature outcome.

#### Example project SMART outcomes that relate to this Access to Nature outcome:

- The accessibility of 8 sites will be improved and this will result in an increase in visitor numbers to the sites.
- A greater diversity of local people will have greater confidence in and knowledge about accessing their local green spaces.
- Access to woodlands for leisure / recreation is improved through investment in information and on line resources.
- Improved access to natural places linked to target NHS sites is reported by beneficiaries.
- Access to the natural environment is improved through investment in individual sites and communicating improved access opportunities.

**Targets - 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.

**Target progress – Target 3a** – 473; **Target 3b** – 154,760 (December 2011)

#### Example of project activities contributing towards this outcome:

- Footpath improvements
- Litter picking
- Habitat creation
- Planting
- Interpretation
- Signage
- Websites / web based information
- Seating
- Access improvements

#### Evidence against this outcome:

About half of projects have provided good evidence of their progress on this outcome. On occasion this lacks depth or analysis and there is an element of assumptions made about improved access following improvement works without testing whether that is in fact the case.

A relatively low number of projects are working to this outcome and therefore there is not a large amount of evidence to report on. Less than a third of projects have included access improvements to promote enjoyment (where access is regarded as both physical and virtual), and where they have there is not always a link in their evidence between these two inter related parts – that is, they are investing in access improvements to promote enjoyment, not simply for the sake of making those changes. Projects tend to list what they have done – for example, 10 benches, coppicing in three areas of woodland, management of woodland in eight sites, footpath improvements at three sites, two new kissing gates and new signs and interpretation – without assessing the impact that is having (and which arguably fit more comfortably under outcome 4 anyway). It is something of a leap of faith to assume that such improvements automatically increase usage and enjoyment, particularly among traditionally hard to reach groups as the programme requires. Similarly, there are complexities in measuring the impact of web based information since the number of site users is not an indication of how many people then go out and use the information they have to access the natural environment, nor is it easy to find out whether they are from the target beneficiary groups.

**All the projects engaged in this area of work record that they are making some or good progress towards outcome 3.** However, the examples available to date to illustrate changes brought about by work towards this outcome are quite sparse, and fall into the two main and obvious areas of impact, physical and virtual access, plus further evidence about how offering access can further increase usage.

#### **Physical access improvements.**

**For example:** Feedback from Groundwork Northumberland's *Ashington Community Woodlands* project suggests that improvements in access to the woodland have led to increased access and usage by local people, as observed by the project partners; *"through the creation of new networks and the improvements of existing ones (path surface improvements, cutting back vegetation, opening up sightlines), the woodland is now a valuable ecological and recreational resource – there has been and continues to be a noticeable increase in site usage"* (Sustrans); *"the pathways through the woods have increased the amount of walkers, joggers and cyclists to the area, not just when the weather is fine, but all through the year"* (Network Rail); *"there has been an increase in the number of organised health groups using the woods for walking and cycling"* (local authority).

#### **Providing virtual access to the natural environment.**

**For example:** *Exploring Nature Play* is a national Play England initiative that has created an online interactive outdoor play map. As well as finding great places to play outside, families can put their own natural places to play on the map. Once they have played there, they can go back and rate the areas, post comments and upload photos to show why they are good places to play – or why they need improving. Play and environmental projects are also being encouraged to use the map to promote their natural spaces to play, so that more children, families and communities can enjoy fun places to have everyday adventures outdoors. Since the launch in September 2011, 1500 entries have been added to the site, suggesting it is at the least increasing opportunities, but it is not possible to conclude that it does actually increase access.



### Improving access leads to increased usage.

**For example:** Groundwork Cheshire's *Wild At Heart* project engages young people with disabilities in the natural environment via special schools, since they are rarely given the opportunity to do this; *"to be able to sit on or touch the grass is such a rare thing for many of these young people as their lives are often very managed"*. A teacher at a special school in Crewe who accompanied young people on a visit to a local green space has become a huge enthusiast because she has seen the reactions of those young people in this new environment; she now delivers other sessions, including Maths and English, in the outdoors. A young man who spent most of his time at home and at school in a wheelchair attended a residential run by the project. He became more confident in these environments and in his own abilities and began walking around the site with one of the project workers. This has led the project to think about how much this young man is encouraged to use the wheelchair for the convenience of others rather than because of need.

Improving access is clearly an important focus for some projects; for example, where people have poor perceptions of a place, physical improvements can be the first step in overcoming their resistance to start visiting or using it; *"without this [physical improvements] people wouldn't go into the woods because it was a bit of a daunting area; now it is much more inviting because it looks nice; also it gives out a message that there are people that care about the woods"*. It may therefore be the case that some projects have not yet got to the point where they see, and importantly can record, improved usage and enjoyment because their engagement work is still ongoing. In others, there may be a need to encourage more assessment of the impact of their work, and those that have not done so to date will receive this feedback in their interim evaluation report reviews by Icarus.

## 2.3.5 Access to Nature Outcome 4

### Fact file: Access to Nature Outcome 4

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

63 projects have one or more SMART outcome that relate to this Access to Nature outcome.

**Example project SMART outcomes that relate to this Access to Nature outcome:**

- People from target communities become engaged in groups which are involved in the care, maintenance and management of local natural spaces.
- The biodiversity and accessibility value of five natural places are maintained and enhanced to meet local needs and for wildlife benefits.
- Access to some sites will be improved as a result of physical improvements by participants and volunteers.
- Improvements to shared communal green space will result in local residents reporting benefits associated with their use.
- Healthy, safe and positive environments for children and adults to engage with nature will be increased.

**Targets - 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.

**Target progress – Target 4a – 862; Target 4b – 85,120; Target 4c – 6,988 (December 2011)**

**Example of project activities contributing towards this outcome:**

- Footpath improvements
- Litter picking
- Habitat creation
- Planting
- Interpretation
- Signage
- Websites / web based information
- Seating
- Access improvements

**Evidence against this outcome:**

There is a very mixed picture with regard to the evidence against this outcome – some projects provide very little and others have quite good information. There are parallels to that for outcome 3 as the two are closely linked for many of the projects that have this focus to their work.

The evidence for this outcome is quite partial in places; some projects highlight what they have done but do not explain how they have assessed that this meets local needs. There is no doubt that evidencing the impact of site improvements can be difficult, but it is the view of Lead Advisers that **the quality of site improvements is usually high**. Also, where those are done locally they are more likely to have local people involved in the process leading to a higher chance that the changes can be sustained. Progress according to projects themselves is patchy; some are making good progress while others have made only marginal inroads into this outcome.

#### Responding to local needs.

**For example:** The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire's *Great Outdoors Project* focuses on a new Local Nature Reserve each year, making physical and intellectual access improvements, engaging actual and potential users, and developing resources to enable groups to use the sites independently. Implementation follows a detailed three month consultation and engagement period, and the preparation of a focused plan of action. This way of working was developed after early difficulties in organising activities and events without consultation, which resulted in poor attendance. Now the three month development period is critical to building trust with stakeholders and building an interest in being involved on the site. The Stroke Association is one organisation that participated in the consultation for Lings LNR. Their feedback was about the number of rest points their members would need, and how their physical limitations affected how they could interact with the site. As a result the project repaired benches and installed others; a carefully planned guided walk introduced the Association's members to the site. The group continues to visit the site independently about twice a year and also used it for a fundraising sponsored walk; they had never used the site previously.

#### Habitat improvements.

**For example:** Treeresponsibility's *Treewise* project has helped children to plant 1,700 trees across three sites. Survey evidence suggests that this will contribute to considerable habitat improvements due to new plant life, fungi, slime moulds and lichen.

#### Improving the appearance of sites.

**For example:** Scarborough Borough Council's *Dell-ve into Nature* project reports that 80% of respondents to an online public survey said that the Dell is more welcoming following the site enhancements that have been made – meadows created, new interpretation boards, litter picked regularly etc. In the words of the Parish Council; “*not a day goes by without someone mentioning how beautiful the Dell is looking, it has given the people of Eastfield a much needed sense of pride*”.

There is clearly something of a need for projects to start evidencing the impact of their work within this outcome. For instance, *Access to Nature in Leeds* has to date delivered 446 volunteer days of practical conservation work at 12 different sites; the project is now aware that their next stage must be surveying site users to find out what they think about the improvements.

## 2.3.6 Access to Nature Outcome 5

### Fact file: Access to Nature 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 have one or more SMART outcome that relate to this Access to Nature outcome.

**Example project SMART outcomes that relate to this Access to Nature outcome:**

- People from the local communities will play an active role in improving the quality of their local natural environment.
- People of all ages from three of Norfolk's most deprived urban areas will have a greater understanding of and appreciation of the importance of Norfolk's natural heritage.
- People from BME inner city communities will have the skills and confidence that they need to develop their own unique urban biodiversity habitats.
- There is a base of knowledge, skills and confidence in the priority communities to enable community based activities to continue into the future.
- Local people, including those from under-represented groups (BME, young people, disabilities) are involved in LNR management committees.

**Target** – 100% of projects actively and positively engaging with local communities

**Target projection** – this is a programme requirement for all projects

**Example of project activities contributing towards this outcome:**

- Friends Of groups
- Partnerships
- Networks
- Community action groups
- Community based activities
- Site management committees
- Regular volunteers

**Evidence against this outcome:**

There is a very mixed picture with regard to the evidence against this outcome – some projects provide very little and others have quite good information.

The use of the term 'ownership' in this outcome has led to a range of different interpretations from projects; it is a word that is hard to unpick and, from an evaluative perspective, to select indicators for. In general however it seems to have been used by projects in one of two ways; to relate to communities having a sense of responsibility for local sites / activities, or with regard to creating local mechanisms to contribute towards the project's sustainability.

In fact **the picture of progress against this outcome is more mixed than any other.**

Some projects had in-built mechanisms in their delivery plan for this to happen, while others have only started thinking about it more latterly. There are several themes evident however, as follows:

- Creating ongoing networks and partnerships
- Building volunteer capacity for the project work to continue
- Developing volunteer groups for site management and / or improvements
- Developing an ongoing interest in the natural environment
- Creating community based groups or increasing local involvement in existing groups

#### **Creating ongoing networks and partnerships.**

**For example:** Treesponsibility's *Treewise* project has a specific outcome about partnership building and as a result are involved in an exciting new partnership called 'The Source' which brings together lots of groups that have been active close to the source of the River Calder. In addition, good relationships have been created with the White Rose Forest and local schools, all of which adds up to generating an ongoing interest in the project's work.

#### **Building volunteer capacity for the project work to continue.**

**For example:** Foresight's *Wheely Natural* project has trained a team of volunteers to become competent cycle leaders. The cycle leaders will be able to support disabled people to access cycle routes after the Access to Nature funding has ended.

#### **Developing volunteer groups for site management and / or improvements.**

**For example:** Warwickshire Wildlife Trust's *Sowe Valley Project* has brought together volunteers from across all the communities linked to the river corridor to form the Sowe Valley Volunteers, and will be supporting them to become a constituted 'Friends of Sowe Valley' group, as opposed to the series of Friends Of groups in the original project plan. This has supported the principle of managing the valley as a corridor rather than isolated sites. The new group has brought people together and enabled them to see the bigger picture and to understand the challenges of managing natural spaces and working with residents in those communities. The group has become very strong and is a significant asset; "*they are our biggest achievement in terms of sustainable outcomes*". One member who helps run the group "*absolutely loves it*" and she says the project has brought a massive sense of change and purpose to her life.

#### **Developing an ongoing interest in the natural environment.**

**For example:** The *Nature of Art in Wessex* works with local partner groups – all of which are community based organisations without a track record in arts or the natural environment – to create and show locally sited art inspired by nature as part of the Salisbury Festival. Through workshops, events, trails and publicity created by the project, people have been encouraged to access the sites worked in and in turn engage with the local partner group. In addition the local groups have been encouraged and supported to network and benefit from each other's experiences.



### Creating community based groups or increasing local involvement in existing groups.

**For example:** The *Perry Common* project run by Birmingham City Council has created a Roll and Stroll walking group that has attracted people who are wheelchair users and parents with pushchairs. The walks have enabled the workers to walk with local people and this has led to additional involvement and volunteering, in work such as brook clearance, invasive species removal, duckling watches and bat and moth watches. The group is now asking for trips further afield.

Where less progress has been made there are references from projects to issues raised elsewhere in this report – the difficulties in recruiting volunteers and problems with partnership working due to the economic climate. It is also possible that these factors will also impact on other projects as they turn their attention to the question of sustainability, for example. As a result, this will be a particularly interesting outcome to check the progress of in the remaining period for Access to Nature.

## 2.3.7 Unexpected outcomes

It is not at all surprising in a programme such as this for there to be unexpected outcomes for individual projects; many started on uncharted journeys that took them into completely new arenas and they may not have been able to foresee what the results of that would be.

Projects were invited to highlight such unexpected outcomes in the online survey and this generated a fascinating list – some are unexpected to the project but would be evident in other Access to Nature projects; some are completely unique to that project's experience. For example:

- The relationships that have grown out of the project
- Collaborative working
- The huge demand generated for a Eco-Club for children and young people; *"we have been inundated"*
- Health and well being benefits
- The amount of information children have retained
- The transformational impact of the work; *"the sheer emotional power of when it works"; "some children who spend much of their time in wheelchairs have been on their feet for long periods"*
- Seeing a vast range of wildlife in an urban setting
- *"We have been bowled over by the number and enthusiasm of volunteers of all ages and all walks of life"*
- Partnerships with other Access to Nature projects
- How the project has prompted villagers' memories of the sites; *"everyone wants to tell us about what they remember and how this links into the history of the villages"*

- Links between a Children's Centre, the parents and children, with a care home through the installation of bird boxes
- The strength of partnership working that has been achieved
- The acceptance of local residents and park users to the changes and improvements being made

It is really beneficial to capture this kind of evidence; it provides further insight into the impact Access to Nature is having but also helps inform what the focus of future funding programmes might be.

## 2.4 Summary – Project management and delivery

### 2.4.1 Introduction

This report started by stating that it is the key evaluator task to provide an overview of progress against what the programme set out to achieve. At this stage in Access to Nature's life cycle that overview is starting to emerge. Indeed, this report paints a picture of a 'work in progress'; all of the Access to Nature awards have been made, 115 projects are working with hard to reach groups in the natural environment, and evidence is emerging about the changes those projects are being able to bring about.

Niggles do exist, projects are facing challenges in their work, and the economic climate has changed the operating context for the projects and Natural England alike. Despite these factors, Access to Nature is a programme where there has always been a sense of optimism and belief in what it is trying to achieve, from both the vast majority of projects and the programme staff. This is the first time that comments from projects have been captured to reflect this sense of a 'good fit' programme, for example:

*"The Access to Nature programme has been fantastic and enabled us to do some genuinely rewarding and valuable work. The support from Natural England and Icarus has been superb."*

*"It has been a pleasure to be lucky enough to work on the programme."*

*"It's a great programme. Everyone we talk to about getting the funding says 'that's just what was needed here'."*

*"We would like to take this opportunity to express our thanks to the Big Lottery Fund and Natural England for the fantastic opportunities which the Access to Nature programme has enabled to widen, increase and sustain access to nature for key beneficiary groups and communities."*

## 2.4.2 The impact of the programme

Access to Nature has five outcomes, and nine targets. In addition, this evaluation was tasked with assessing progress against the programme's vision, Natural England's strategic outcomes, and the Big Lottery Changing Spaces outcomes. An 'outcomes framework' has been designed to indicate the linkages between these different elements, and to help assess where progress against Access to Nature outcomes indicates progress against one of the other sets of outcomes, as below. This illustrates how the programme is contributing towards this range of purposes and where the main linkages lie.

The funded projects are working across the five Access to Nature outcomes; outcomes three and four are however less evident than the others. All but one target is projected to over perform, and that is 2b – 50,000 volunteers to have a new opportunity to actively participate in training and development programmes, gaining new skills by 2014.

Good progress is being made across all five outcomes and therefore also across broader Natural England Changing Spaces goals. It is possible to see the impact projects are having and the changes they are effecting.

**Table 4:** How Access to Nature outcomes relate to the programme’s vision, Natural England’s strategic outcomes, and the Big Lottery Changing Spaces outcomes

Access to Nature Outcomes	Outcome 1 Improved Opportunities	Outcome 2 Learning	Outcome 3 Access – physical and virtual	Outcome 4 Quality	Outcome 5 Ownership
<p><b>Access to Nature Vision</b> High quality environments which are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Valued and accessible</li> <li>• Rich in wildlife and opportunities for learning, health and well being</li> <li>• Safe, clean and attractive and well used</li> </ul>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<p><b>Big Lottery Changing Spaces outcome 1</b> Improved local environments, open spaces and countryside – accessible to all and relevant to needs?</p>	✓		✓	✓	
<p><b>Big Lottery Changing Spaces outcome 2</b> A greater sense of community ownership of local natural places</p>					✓
<p><b>Big Lottery Changing Spaces outcome 3</b> Improved social, economic and environmental sustainability</p>		✓		✓	
<p><b>Natural England’s strategic outcome 1</b> Contribution to evidence about how ‘people are inspired to enjoy, understand and act for the natural environment’</p>	✓	✓			✓
<p><b>Natural England’s strategic outcome 2</b> Contribution to the conservation, enhancement and sustainable management of England’s natural environment</p>			✓	✓	



Within this overall picture lie life affirming stories that highlight how projects have changed individuals' lives, engaged a diverse range of people in the natural environment and made high quality improvements to natural places. This is a programme that is on track to achieve what it set out to do.

Evaluation over the final two years of the programme will build on this picture further. Project evaluation reports are proving to be an excellent insight into their experiences, and as more are completed the evidence base will continue to grow. There will be some particularly interesting threads to track and these have been noted elsewhere in this report – for example, the situation regarding target 2b, the ability projects have to record impacts for outcomes 3 and 4, and progress against outcome 5.

Unexpected outcomes have been noted for the individual projects, but there may also be surprises wrought by the programme as a whole. There is good evidence that many organisations are having to re-think their traditional ways of working as a result of being part of Access to Nature; they can no longer rely on attracting people who are interested in the natural environment to support their work, that is, the 'usual suspects'. A particularly interesting line of enquiry will be the extent to which this brings about long lasting cultural change for some organisations.

### 2.4.3 Sustainability

57% of projects are very confident that their work will have a lasting impact beyond the lifetime of Access to Nature, a further 43% have some confidence. While the work may not necessarily continue in exactly the same vein, there is clearly a sense that it will have achieved something of what it set out to do in terms of bringing about lasting change. There are contra-indicators for this in terms of the difficulties projects are experiencing in recruiting volunteers and in sustaining engagement from beneficiary groups, so it will be interesting to reflect in more detail on this area as an increasing number of projects come to an end.



# 3

Section three:

Key evaluation findings –

## Programme management





Section three:

Key evaluation findings –

# Programme management

## 3.1 Programme management

### 3.1.1 Introduction

As stated elsewhere in this report, less attention will be paid, or is required for the question of programme management in this report. At this point in the programme life cycle the interesting focus is quite rightly on what is happening within the projects, and what changes they are effecting.

It is the case however that there have been huge internal changes in Natural England over the last year. The most significant of these is the reorganisation of everyone working on Access to Nature into a single team, and a significant reduction in capacity at the team management level. The programme has also moved into a new function, Customer Services. These changes inform the context within which Access to Nature has had to operate, and as a result are worthy of a brief review.

### 3.1.2 The Access to Nature team

With reduced management capacity, and the loss of expertise in the management function, it might be expected that team management would be problematic. Indeed, there have been criticisms that sufficient time was not made available by Natural England for a knowledge transfer between individuals, and that in general staff are exhausted by the process of change.

Despite these factors however, there is a real sense of a well managed team, pulling together and providing mutual support, with individuals motivated to provide a well run programme with good levels of support to individual projects. It is recognised that there is a huge workload for the Team Leader but it appears to be the case that this streamlining of management roles has led to faster and more consistent decision making overall.

### 3.1.3 Internal fit with Natural England

Placing Access to Nature within the Customer Services function has been questioned, as the link between the two has been described as somewhat tenuous. What previous evaluation

reports have highlighted is the danger that the learning from this programme would be lost within Natural England, and indeed it has been a criticism of the Project Board / Independent Grant Panel that, in its planning phase, Access to Nature itself did not refer back to the learning from previous programmes, both internally and among partner (consortium) organisations. For this to be optimised the programme would ideally fit within the Access and Engagement function where the learning would inform other, related aspects of Natural England's work.

It is clear however that the Team Leader is working hard to raise the profile of Access to Nature internally within Natural England, and to build links with the Access and Engagement function. The political climate is finally favourable for Access to Nature – through Big Society and the Localism Agenda, for example – and it is not surprising that the rest of the organisation will start looking at what the programme offers in this respect. There is probably more that can be done to make these linkages, but this is time consuming work that would require further input from an already stretched Team Leader.

### 3.1.4 Support to projects

The team capacity has been reduced as whole and this has meant that support to projects is more thinly spread than previously. For example, Lead Advisers have had to change their mindset from a 'nice to do' approach and towards 'have to do'. Despite this 59% of projects strongly agree with the statement that they get the advice and support from Natural England that addresses their needs, and a further 38% agree; *"...the support of our Grants Adviser has been second to none – provides an excellent level of service ..."*. Only one project has commented that they find their Lead Adviser relatively unavailable.

There remain a minority of organisations that are unhappy with the reporting requirements of Access to Nature. Where there is specific comment on this it largely focuses on the requirement to evidence every bit of expenditure. For example, one project has described a very stressful experience when a quarterly claim was returned with a query against every line, resulting in a lack of confidence in the process as a whole.

As discussed in earlier reports, there is an inherent tension between the delivery of an outcome led grant programme requiring quality engagement work with hard to reach groups, and a focus on reporting against targets. There is no doubt that some projects included optimistic targets on the assumption that they needed to demonstrate high numbers in the assessment process, and these are now proving something of a reach to achieve. For others there has been a realisation that targets are not an effective reporting mechanism for this kind of work; *"...you cannot play the numbers game in our area..."*. In addition, some projects are finding the process of finding out the necessary information about their beneficiaries challenging; there is still some confusion about beneficiary definitions; and dissatisfaction exists about not recording repeat users.

### 3.1.5 Progress with evaluation

Access to Nature has a self evaluation focus and projects have had evaluation training, resources and support from Icarus and Lead Advisers. One of the benefits of formative

evaluation is that the evaluation process itself can be tweaked as the programme progresses, and in the last six months some projects have benefited from formal reviews of their evaluation reports with the intention that this will further increase evaluation capacity, and as a result the quality of final reports.

There is a real sense that evaluation is embedded in the Access to Nature programme, that it adds value and helps inform ongoing development and management of the scheme. Moreover, the evidence that is being generated by projects is of a sufficient quality and depth to understand the impact the programme is having.

### 3.1.6 Learning about programme management

There are several points worth noting here around the question of programme management for any future initiatives:

- The funding programme should be located within Natural England in the function where there is best fit and where there is maximum opportunity for the sharing of knowledge and learning
- There should be a clearly defined link to Natural England priorities and internal processes in place that enable messages from experimental programmes to be shared internally, and at the right levels
- Consideration should be given to the financial claims process and what is a fit for purpose system, given the nature of the scheme and the kinds of organisations it funds
- Formative evaluation should be a consideration for all significant funding programmes in order to promote learning and success



# 4

Section four:  
**Conclusions**





Section four:

# Conclusions

## 4.1 Conclusions

The Access to Nature programme has **achieved a significant amount to date:**

- **Application and assessment processes have been put in place** and 115 awards have been made against consistent criteria
- **Access to Nature staff have continued to work hard and flexibly** to deliver in a customer focused fashion
- **The programme outcomes and targets are reflected** in the spread of projects awarded grants
- **Projects are proceeding with their work** in a difficult operating climate and are largely confident they can deliver what they set out to do
- **Much has been learnt about the effective engagement of people from diverse backgrounds to the natural environment**
- There are examples emerging of changes that projects are bringing about
- **There is a general confidence amongst projects that the impact of their work will be sustained** beyond the lifetime of their project

More evidence of impact will emerge during the remaining period of the programme that will help build a comprehensive picture of what has been achieved. It is now particularly important that Natural England considers how the learning from this programme can help inform its response to the current political focus on empowerment; that the learning is shared widely with partners to help inform their work too; and that there is a clear succession plan in place.

# Appendices



## Appendix one

# Evaluation framework

Broad Evaluation Questions	Specific evaluation questions	Key stakeholders	Source of data	Methodology
<b>Impact: : Targets and Outcomes</b>				
<b>1 What contribution has the A2N programme made to the Big Lottery's Changing Spaces Outcomes?</b>	<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"> <li>• A2N Steering Group</li> <li>• A2N Project Board</li> <li>• A2N Project Team</li> <li>• Grant recipients</li> <li>• Independent Grants Panel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation reference groups: monitoring reports and maps</li> <li>• Icarus interim evaluation reports</li> <li>• Reports from the project team including six monthly reports to the Board</li> <li>• Six monthly progress reports from grant recipients</li> <li>• Interview evidence</li> <li>• On line survey evidence</li> <li>• Case Study evidence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On line surveys</li> <li>• Interviews</li> <li>• Desk based research</li> <li>• Focus group</li> <li>• Case studies</li> </ul>

Continued on following pages

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Broad Evaluation Questions	Specific evaluation questions	Key stakeholders	Source of data	Methodology
<p><b>2 What contribution has the A2N programme made to Natural England’s strategic outcomes and supporting evidence base?</b></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"> <li>• Natural England Evidence Team</li> <li>• A2N National Project Team</li> <li>• Grant recipients</li> <li>• Regional advisers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation reference group: reports and maps</li> <li>• Icarus interim evaluation reports</li> <li>• Reports from the project team</li> <li>• Six-monthly progress reports from grant recipients</li> <li>• Case study evidence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On line surveys</li> <li>• Interviews</li> <li>• Desk based research</li> <li>• Focus group</li> <li>• Case studies</li> </ul>
<p><b>3 To what extent has the Consortium’s vision for the A2N programme been realised?</b></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"> <li>• Valued and accessible</li> <li>• Rich in wildlife and opportunities for learning, health and well being</li> <li>• Safe, clean and attractive and well used</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A2N Steering group</li> <li>• A2N Project Board</li> <li>• A2N National Project Team</li> <li>• Natural England Evidence Team</li> <li>• Grant recipients and their stakeholders</li> <li>• Regional advisers</li> <li>• Independent Grants Panel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation reference group: monitoring reports and maps</li> <li>• Icarus interim evaluation reports</li> <li>• Reports from the project team</li> <li>• Six-monthly progress reports from grant recipients</li> <li>• Monthly updates from grant recipients</li> <li>• Case study evidence</li> <li>• Interview evidence</li> <li>• On line survey evidence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On line surveys</li> <li>• Interviews</li> <li>• Desk based research</li> <li>• Focus group</li> <li>• Case studies</li> </ul>

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Broad Evaluation Questions	Specific evaluation questions	Key stakeholders	Source of data	Methodology
<p><b>4 To what extent has the A2N programme achieved its 5 main outcomes and related targets?</b></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"> <li>• A2N Steering group</li> <li>• A2N Project Board</li> <li>• A2N National Project Team</li> <li>• Natural England Evidence Team</li> <li>• Grant recipients and their stakeholders</li> <li>• Regional advisers</li> <li>• Independent Grants Panel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation reference group: monitoring reports and maps</li> <li>• Icarus interim evaluation reports</li> <li>• Reports from the project team</li> <li>• Six-monthly progress reports from grant recipients</li> <li>• Monthly updates from grant recipients</li> <li>• Case Study evidence</li> <li>• Interview evidence</li> <li>• On line survey evidence</li> <li>• Grant assessments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On line surveys</li> <li>• Interviews</li> <li>• Desk based research</li> <li>• Focus group</li> <li>• Case studies</li> </ul>



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Broad Evaluation Questions	Specific evaluation questions	Key stakeholders	Source of data	Methodology
<p><b>5 To what extent has the A2N programme reached its target beneficiaries?</b></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"> <li>• A2N Steering group</li> <li>• A2N Project Board</li> <li>• A2N National Project Team</li> <li>• Natural England Evidence Team</li> <li>• Grant recipients and their stakeholders</li> <li>• Regional advisers</li> <li>• Independent Grants Panel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation reference group: monitoring reports and maps, including targeting maps and targeting hits</li> <li>• Icarus interim evaluation reports</li> <li>• Reports from the project team</li> <li>• Six-monthly progress reports from grant recipients</li> <li>• Monthly updates from grant recipients</li> <li>• Case study evidence</li> <li>• Interview evidence</li> <li>• On line survey evidence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On line surveys</li> <li>• Interviews</li> <li>• Desk based research</li> <li>• Focus group</li> <li>• Case studies</li> </ul>

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Broad Evaluation Questions	Specific evaluation questions	Key stakeholders	Source of data	Methodology
<p><b>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)?</b></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"> <li>• A2N Steering group</li> <li>• A2N Project Board</li> <li>• A2N National Project Team</li> <li>• Natural England Evidence Team</li> <li>• Grant recipients and their stakeholders</li> <li>• Regional advisers</li> <li>• Independent Grants Panel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evidence team: monitoring reports and maps</li> <li>• Icarus interim evaluation reports</li> <li>• Reports from the project team</li> <li>• Six-monthly progress reports from grant recipients</li> <li>• Monthly updates from grant recipients</li> <li>• Case study evidence</li> <li>• Interview evidence</li> <li>• On line survey evidence</li> <li>• Action plans following interim evaluations</li> <li>• Conference evaluation</li> <li>• Outcomes spreadsheet</li> <li>• KPI reports to Big Lottery (quarterly and annual)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On line surveys</li> <li>• Interviews</li> <li>• Desk based research</li> <li>• Focus group</li> <li>• Case studies</li> </ul>

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

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Broad Evaluation Questions	Specific evaluation questions	Key stakeholders	Source of data	Methodology
<b>Process</b>				
<p><b>8 To what extent has Natural England managed the programme effectively and efficiently?</b></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"> <li>• A2N Project Board</li> <li>• A2N Project Team</li> <li>• Regional advisers</li> <li>• Independent Grants Panel</li> <li>• Grant recipients</li> <li>• Evidence Team</li> <li>• Unsuccessful grant applicants</li> <li>• Big Lottery</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Case study evidence</li> <li>• Interview/focus group evidence</li> <li>• On line survey evidence</li> <li>• Grant assessments</li> <li>• KPI reports to Big Lottery</li> <li>• NE internal audit reports</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desk top research</li> <li>• On line surveys</li> <li>• Telephone interviews</li> <li>• Focus groups</li> <li>• Case studies</li> </ul>

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

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Broad Evaluation Questions	Specific evaluation questions	Key stakeholders	Source of data	Methodology
<b>Inputs</b>				
<b>11 Have the inputs to the A2N programme and projects been adequate to ensure the delivery of an effective and efficient programme?</b>	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"> <li>• A2N Project Board</li> <li>• A2N Project Team</li> <li>• Regional advisers</li> <li>• Independent Grants Panel</li> <li>• Project stakeholders</li> <li>• Big Lottery</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reports from the project team</li> <li>• Case study evidence</li> <li>• Interview/focus group evidence</li> <li>• On line survey evidence</li> <li>• NE internal audit reports</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desk top research</li> <li>• On line surveys</li> <li>• Telephone interviews</li> <li>• Focus groups</li> <li>• Case studies</li> </ul>
<b>Context</b>				
<b>12 What influence, if any, have internal or external contextual factors had on the management and delivery of the A2N programme?</b>	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"> <li>• A2N Project Board</li> <li>• A2N Project Team</li> <li>• Regional advisers</li> <li>• Independent Grants Panel</li> <li>• Big Lottery</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reports from the project team</li> <li>• Case study evidence</li> <li>• Interview/focus group evidence</li> <li>• On line survey evidence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desk top research</li> <li>• On line surveys</li> <li>• Telephone interviews</li> <li>• Focus groups</li> <li>• Case studies</li> </ul>



## Appendix two

# Key recommendations for future programmes

## 2009 Evaluation report summary

### Programme management

- Decision making processes need to be fit for purpose, and not result in undue delays. This includes the filling of vacant posts.
- The ebbs and flows of workloads need mapping for the lifetime of a programme early in the planning stages, to inform decisions about staffing levels and roles, and management structures.
- Opportunities to transfer learning from one grant programme to another should be maximised. This should include monitoring the allocation of staff time to further inform decisions about roles and capacity over the lifetime of the programme.
- National portfolio roles are not compatible with grant assessments.

### The grant application process

- Less detailed applications and a lighter touch assessment process for smaller projects would attract more interest from and be welcomed by smaller organisations (if this is the programme's intention). The question of proportionality needs to be addressed from the outset.
- More time is required to commission and test an on line application (and grants management) system.
- The scope of the eligibility check should be questioned; could this be an expression of interest to check eligibility alone rather than a somewhat detailed process?
- The Stage 2 application form should be smarter to elicit better quality information from projects.
- The application, assessment and monitoring forms should be designed in tandem to ensure co-terminosity.
- The logic behind two separate processes of independent assessment (by the Grants Adviser and the Board / Panel) should be questioned.
- The requirements on projects to participate in the programme overall – in terms of evaluation, for example – should be made clear from the outset.

- There should be confidence to enter into constructive dialogue with the programme funder about protocols and processes. While some may be mandatory, there may be room for manoeuvre with others – however this depends on the organisation having sufficient expertise and collated learning from previous programmes (from formative evaluations for example) to inform this debate.

## Ongoing programme management

- Monitoring and evaluation expertise should be brought into the programme team (internally or externally) from the very start. The new National Schemes Team also provides the opportunity to build organisational capacity in this respect, as does support from the Evidence Team.
- Monitoring systems need to be fit for purpose; to generate information on the progress the programme requires, while seeking information proportionate to the size of the grants awarded.
- Web based monitoring systems should be investigated to remove the need for staff to transpose data from one source to another.
- Projects need to know what is required of them with regards to monitoring and evaluation from the outset.
- There needs to be clear assessment of the programme ethos and style of working, plus its approach to risk, to explore the impact on staffing levels. A very hands on approach is clearly more staff intensive and may ultimately be too expensive to offer.
- More time and expertise in brief writing are required to commission and test a grants management system.

## Coverage and reach of funded projects

- Quality assurance processes need to be in place to ensure that applicants produce good quality SMART outcomes that are aligned to those for the programme overall.

# Positive aspects of the programme

## 2009 Evaluation report summary

### Programme management

- The new National Schemes team offers a number of structural advantages in terms of developing organisational capacity in large grant management, providing staffing flexibility across schemes, and contributing additional expertise to the programme.
- There are high levels of commitment and motivation to ensure communication is good within the operational staff team.
- Operational staff have committed to working flexibly, and sometimes 'out of role', in order to ensure effective delivery of the programme to applicants and projects.
- The regional structure plays an important role in embedding the programme within Natural England, and ensuring it contributes towards organisational priorities and outcomes. It has also helped build bridges with the Big Lottery regional contacts and create good working relationships at this level.
- Good external relationships exist with the programme funder, the Big Lottery, both regionally and nationally.

### The grant application process

- The principle of an on line application process is a good one.
- Guidance materials are generally thorough and detailed (although there may be too much information provided).
- The support of the Regional Advisers is valuable and commended for the quality of service provided.
- The two-stage application process is structured to provide independent scrutiny for the Stage 2 assessment.
- The Project Board and Independent Grants Panel add a further degree of objectivity to the scrutiny of applications.
- The Project Board having delegated decision making powers for projects less than £250,000 reduces the workload on the Independent Grants Panel.

## Ongoing programme management

- Good levels of quality and timely support are provided to grantees by staff.
- There is a strong sense of customer focus among staff.
- Projects welcome the single point of contact for queries.
- The new monitoring system will help address problems highlighted with the initial process.

## Coverage and reach of funded projects

- There is a good distribution of funded projects across the different kinds of organisations, with a good showing by the voluntary sector particularly.
- There is a reasonable geographical spread of projects. Where there are variances to this pattern, steps have been taken improve reach or manage expectations.
- There is an acceptable spread of projects against the five outcomes and against the target beneficiaries.
- The majority of projects have welcomed the review of outcomes and targets.

# 2009 Key recommendations summary

## Consolidating the Access to Nature team and procedures to meet current and future needs.

- The process of role definition within the NST requires further work and explanation. Regional staff need to be able to engage with the most appropriate national team member as required and decision making processes need to be clearly articulated.
- The time is now right to ensure that Access to Nature has a sufficiently high profile and improved linkages within Natural England. This requires someone at a sufficiently senior level to champion the programme within the organisation.
- At this pivotal time in the programme's lifetime the terms of reference and membership of the Steering Group and Project Board should be reviewed to ensure the existence of these groups – and the investment required to service them – adds maximum value to the programme as a whole. The scope exists to make more use of the Steering Group (externally) and the Project Board (internally) to act as advocates for the programme now there is a shift from allocation of funds to considering the impact of the programme, the learning from its delivery and the development of a successor scheme.
- Continue to create regular opportunities for communication between regional staff and the national team.
- An open and honest dialogue is needed about the extent to which the programme can remain so 'hands on' with projects in the current operating context, to assess what is possible given the available resources, and to ensure that the KPIs are achieved. The place of Project Support staff should not be overlooked in this process as where this works well, their contribution is valued. It has also been suggested that much of the claim work is more commensurate to their grade than that of the Regional Advisers.
- The issue of the time taken to answer queries at the NST level needs to be resolved to ensure a quality service is provided. There is an argument for a KPI around the maximum number of days a projects can expect a response to such a query.
- Consideration should be given to whether every receipt and invoice is required to support claims; this requirement could be dropped after projects have proved they can complete their claims appropriately after say two or three quarters.
- Time must be devoted to assessing the current operating context, anticipating the problems that projects may face and having measures in place to respond to those problems as they arise. Such problems are likely to be immediate in their nature, requiring immediate responses; lengthy decision making processes will inflate anxiety and frustration among projects.

## Improving the quality of data on the programme.

- Regional Advisers require regular briefings and training about the grant management role which is new to many of them. This should include clear explanations about why monitoring is required, how the data should be processed and what that information is used for.
- Regional Advisers need briefing about the importance of the outcomes section of the QPRs plus the interpretation and relevance of the evaluation question.
- Projects need briefing about the QPR changes and the opportunity taken to explain why the data is collected and how it is used should be taken at the same time.
- Work needs to be completed about the processes and sanctions for addressing incomplete or poor quality monitoring forms. This includes the process for signing off requests by projects to change aspects of their project (for example, targets, completion dates, activities etc.).
- Knowledge about the organisational spread of funded (and indeed unfunded) projects would be helpful. This would give an indication of whether the design of the programme has favoured some kinds and sizes of projects over others; it would therefore help inform the design of the Access to Nature successor scheme.
- The system to record and update progress on project targets needs to be consistently applied; this information is vital in demonstrating the programme's progress over time.
- Projects need advice, guidance and possibly training on methods for counting and / or estimating beneficiaries.

## Provide adequate support to projects on evaluation.

- Regional Advisers need further training and / or support to enable them to engage effectively with projects about evaluation.
- Regional Advisers need to keep in touch with projects about progress with their evaluations; without project self evaluation reports there will be little evidence upon which to base the collated summary of the programme's progress in these full evaluation reports.
- A review of evaluation resources is required to ensure opportunities to support projects are maximised and to foster shared learning across projects.
- Projects should have more opportunities to share practice and their learning on an ongoing basis.
- There should be more scope for projects to share their experiences and learning about their practice, particularly when working on similar kinds of projects or with the same target groups. The suggested on line forum (recommended above) could be one way in which this could happen.



- Mechanisms need to be in place to share learning between projects and Regional Advisers about practice and impact. This could take the shape of an on line forum, hosted by Icarus, which would also generate the themes of interest for the case study themed papers planned for summer 2011.
- Projects require regular evaluation updates – this could take the form of an evaluation newsletter to projects. It may also be useful to re-focus one of the planned national conferences as an evaluation update / shared learning event.

## Ensuring the learning from this programme is applied.

- The evaluation findings should be taken note of internally and used as an essential point of reference in designing the Access to Nature successor scheme.
- The membership of the evaluation reference group should be reviewed to ensure that there is a senior representation from the NST.
- Evaluation reports should be formally presented by Icarus to the Steering Group and Project Board as a matter of course.
- Formal links should be made with the Changing Spaces evaluation board via the Natural England staff member who sits on this group. The evaluation findings should be taken note of internally and used as an essential point of reference in designing the Access to Nature successor scheme.

# Positive aspects of the programme 2010

## About strategic management of the programme

- The structure of the new National Schemes Team has not been subject to any significant criticism.
- The NST offers a number of structural advantages in terms of developing organisational capacity in large grant management, providing staffing flexibility across schemes, and contributing additional expertise to the programme.
- Good external relationships exist with the programme funder, the Big Lottery, particularly at the national level.
- Both the Steering Group and the Project Board are committed to exploring how they can best contribute to the ongoing management, delivery and learning process of Access to Nature.

## About the grant application process

- The principle of an on line application process is a good one.
- Guidance materials are generally thorough and detailed.
- The support of the Regional Advisers to applicants has been valuable and commended for the quality of service provided.
- The two-stage application process is structured to provide independent scrutiny for the Stage 2 assessment and the Project Board and Independent Grants Panel add a further degree of objectivity to the scrutiny of applications.
- The separation of assessment functions between the Regional Advisers and Grant Advisers has worked well.
- The Project Board and Independent Grants Panel have been effective in making informed decisions about grant awards.
- The workload has been managed and the assessments completed.

## About the ongoing management of the programme

- Projects know how to access support from Natural England and good levels of quality and timely support are provided to grantees by staff highlighting a strong sense of customer focus.
- Projects welcome the single point of contact for queries.
- The team members are committed to Access to Nature and to making the programme work effectively.
- The September 2010 training for Regional Advisers has helped reinforce procedures for the monitoring process.
- Staffing levels have been sufficient and the splitting of roles between Grant and Regional Advisers has been successful.
- Projects have a good grasp of the evaluation requirements and are progressing with implementation of their evaluation action plans.

## About the coverage and reach of projects

- There is a reasonable geographical spread of projects and of organisation type.
- Programme outcomes 1, 2 and 5 are well represented by the funded projects.
- The majority of projects have welcomed the outcome review process.
- Projections indicate that the majority of targets will be exceeded.

## About the management of projects

- Projects are making good progress against milestones, conditions and permissions.
- A high proportion of projects are confident they are on schedule with their plans.
- The programme is providing the opportunity for relationship building and partnership working.
- A significant majority of projects are on schedule to deliver their first evaluation report.
- Natural England has taken steps to ensure that it can respond adequately to projects experiencing difficulties securing their anticipated matched funding.

## About project impact

- Projects report they are making good progress towards achieving their outcomes.

# Learning from the programme 2010

## About strategic management of the programme

- Decision making processes need to be fit for purpose, and not result in undue delays.
- There needs to be clear alignment with Natural England's strategic objectives and a clear 'fit' for a programme with the organisation as a whole. This includes mechanisms for ensuring wide internal dissemination of the learning from such a programme.
- Where advisory panels are built into the process – such as the Steering Group and Project Board – best use should be made of them.
- Any significant re-structuring mid programme requires effective change management processes to be in place.

## About the grant application process

- Less detailed applications and a lighter touch assessment process for smaller projects would attract more interest from and be welcomed by smaller / less experienced organisations. The question of proportionality needs to be addressed from the outset.
- More time is required to commission and test an on line application (and grants management) system. There may be scope to collaborate with other funding programmes to share resources in this respect.
- The scope of the Stage 1 eligibility check should be reviewed to include a more rigorous quality check.
- The Stage 2 application form should be smarter to elicit better quality information from projects to aid understanding and thereby assessment.
- Ensure there are clear definitions of the terminology applied by the programme from the outset and applied consistently throughout: outcomes, targets, milestones etc.
- The application, assessment and monitoring forms should be designed in tandem to ensure co-terminosity early in the lifetime of the programme.
- The requirements on projects to participate in the programme overall – in terms of monitoring and evaluation, for example – should be made clear from the outset.
- Consider whether set application deadlines will enable the assessment / decision making workload to be managed more easily.
- The decision making process and the 'goalposts' needs to be consistent throughout the programme; the ethos of being even handed and open is important for credibility.
- Continue to build on the individuals and skills developed through this programme in terms of project support, assessment, decision making and programme management.

## About the ongoing management of the programme

- Tasks should be completed by staff working at a level commensurate to their grade – for example, project support staff make a positive contribution to the programme in their work alongside Regional Advisers and often have more skills, knowledge and experience relevant to aspects of the grant management function.
- Clarity is needed about why monitoring takes place and what the information collected will be used for – both staff and projects require this understanding in order to engage effectively and positively with the monitoring systems.
- Projects need to know what is required of them with regards to monitoring and evaluation from the outset, and what constitutes acceptable evidence of targets.

## About the coverage and reach of projects

- Quality assurance processes need to be in place to ensure that applicants produce good quality SMART outcomes (and targets) that are aligned to those for the programme overall.

## About the management of projects

- Milestones should be re-profiled post award to account for any delays, seasonal requirements and adherence to conditions.
- Consideration should be given to how best ensure projects are sufficiently resourced to deliver their targets and outcomes. Scrutiny of resourcing or clear guidance is required – assessors need to have the skills for this scrutiny if required.

## About the impact of projects

- There needs to be recognition that an emphasis on targets can undermine an outcomes focused approach that requires long term relationship building.



# Recommendations 2010

## About the strategic management of the programme

- The process of role definition within the NST requires further work and explanation. Regional staff need to be able to engage with the most appropriate national team member as required and decision making processes need to be clearly articulated.
- The time is now right to ensure that Access to Nature has a sufficiently high profile and improved linkages within Natural England. This requires someone at a sufficiently senior level to champion the programme within the organisation.
- Similarly at this pivotal time in the programme's lifetime the terms of reference and membership of the Steering Group and Project Board should be reviewed to ensure the existence of these groups – and the investment required to service them – adds maximum value to the programme as a whole. The scope exists to make more use of the Steering Group (externally) and the Project Board (internally) to act as advocates for the programme now there is a shift from allocation of funds to considering the impact of the programme, the learning from its delivery and the development of a successor scheme.
- The membership of the evaluation reference group should be reviewed to ensure that there is a senior representation from the NST.
- Evaluation reports should be formally presented by Icarus to the Steering Group and Project Board as a matter of course.
- Formal links should be made with the Changing Spaces evaluation board via the Natural England staff member who sits on this group.
- Continue to create regular opportunities for communication between regional staff and the national team.

## About the grant application process

- The evaluation findings should be taken note of internally and used as an essential point of reference in designing the Access to Nature successor scheme.

## About the ongoing management of the programme

- An open and honest dialogue is needed about the extent to which the programme can remain so 'hands on' with projects in the current operating context, to assess what is possible given the available resources, and to ensure that the KPIs are achieved. The place of Project Support staff should not be overlooked in this process as where this works well, their contribution is valued. It has also been suggested that much of the claim work is more commensurate to their grade than that of the Regional Advisers.

- The issue of the time taken to answer queries at the NST level needs to be resolved to ensure a quality service is provided. There is an argument for a KPI around the maximum number of days a projects can expect a response to such a query.
- Consideration should be given to whether every receipt and invoice is required to support claims; this requirement could be dropped after projects have proved they can complete their claims appropriately after say two or three quarters as per the current action on overheads.
- Projects need advice, guidance and possibly training on methods for counting and / or estimating beneficiaries. Similarly Regional Advisers need to be equipped with this knowledge.
- Regional Advisers require regular briefings and training about the grant management role which is new to many of them. This should include clear explanations about why monitoring is required, how the data should be processed and what that information is used for.
- Regional Advisers need briefing about the importance of the outcomes section of the QPRs plus the interpretation and relevance of the evaluation question.
- Projects need briefing about the QPR changes and the opportunity taken to explain why the data is collected and how it is used should be taken at the same time.
- Work needs to be completed about the processes and sanctions for addressing incomplete or poor quality monitoring forms. This includes the process for signing off requests by projects to change aspects of their project (for example, targets, completion dates, activities etc.).
- Regional Advisers need further training and / or support to enable them to engage effectively with projects about evaluation.
- A review of evaluation resources is required to ensure opportunities to support projects are maximised and to foster shared learning across projects.
- Mechanisms need to be in place to share learning between projects, the national team (especially those designing the successor programme) and Regional Advisers about practice and impact. This could take the shape of an on-line forum, hosted by Icarus, which would also generate the themes of interest for the case study themed papers planned for summer 2011.
- Projects require regular evaluation updates – this could take the form of an evaluation newsletter to projects. It may also be useful to re-focus one of the planned national conferences as an evaluation update / shared learning event.

## About the coverage and reach of projects

- Knowledge about the organisational spread of funded (and indeed unfunded) projects would be helpful. This would give an indication of whether the design of the programme has favoured some kinds and sizes of projects over others; it would therefore help inform the design of the Access to Nature successor scheme.
- The system to record and update progress on project targets needs to be consistently applied; this information is vital in demonstrating the programme's progress over time.

## About the management of projects

- Time must be devoted to assessing the current operating context, anticipating the problems that projects may face and having measures in place to respond to those problems as they arise. Such problems are likely to be immediate in their nature, requiring immediate responses; lengthy decision making processes will inflate anxiety and frustration among projects.
- There should be more scope for projects to share their experiences and learning about their practice, particularly when working on similar kinds of projects or with the same target groups. The suggested on-line forum (recommended above) could be one way in which this could happen.

## About the impact of projects

- Projects should have more opportunities to share practice and their learning on an ongoing basis.
- Regional Advisers need to keep in touch with projects about progress with their evaluations; without project self evaluation reports there will be little evidence upon which to base the collated summary of the programme's progress in these full evaluation reports.

