

Access to Evaluation

SUMMARY EVALUATION REPORT
January 2011



1. Introduction

Icarus was appointed in spring 2009 to develop and implement an evaluation process for the Access to Nature programme. This is what is described as 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.

The **overall purpose** of the programme evaluation is to assess progress in achieving the Access to Nature outcomes. The evaluation addresses a series of key questions within an evaluation framework that has been developed by Icarus in conjunction with the programme's Evaluation Reference Group.

Icarus collected and analysed data during the autumn of 2010 to produce the second over arching evaluation report for the programme. This process included interviews with Access to Nature staff, on line surveys of key stakeholders, and an on line survey with funded projects (which achieved a 45.7% response rate). In addition, all completed Quarterly Progress Reports were analysed, together with the few interim project evaluation reports that have been received to date.

2. About this report

It is good practice that the stakeholders asked to participate in an evaluation have the opportunity to see the overall findings. Since Access to Nature grantees were surveyed as part of the programme evaluation, this report has been produced to give an overview of the findings to that audience.

This then is a brief summary report arising from the second full evaluation report for Access to Nature, completed in December 2010. It highlights the key findings from that report.

3. Summary of findings

Overall picture

Firstly, it is worth noting that comments from both staff and projects reflect a belief in the value of the programme, a commitment to its ambitions, and a sense of optimism that it will change the way individuals, groups and communities relate to their natural environment: *"it's a wonderful idea; it's really helping us deliver good quality educational and volunteering opportunities.."; "it's supporting exactly what we do and local people want, so*

it feels a good fit and we feel we can deliver an excellent quality project..”
(project survey respondents).

Programme outcomes and targets

Access to Nature has five outcomes, and nine targets. In addition to checking progress against these intentions, 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.

Based on the outcomes review process that has taken place, the funded projects are working across the five Access to Nature outcomes and associated targets; 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.

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.

At this stage it is not possible to definitively report on actual progress in this respect; the majority of projects are in the very early stages of delivery, monitoring data has not been aggregated and little in the way of evaluative information has been produced. As projects get underway, and interim evaluation reports are produced, this is a picture that will become clearer over time.

It is positive however that a high proportion of projects report that they are on schedule to complete their work and to achieve their outcomes.

Key Performance Indicators

To date, the programme has largely achieved its Key Performance Indicators. There have been some delays in processing new applications due to the late bulge received towards the end of the application period. The Big Lottery has however been satisfied that Natural England is working as hard as it can on these areas and that projects have been kept informed where delays have incurred. It is a great testament to the staff team that they have been successful in this respect despite a variety of management and delivery challenges and their heavy assessment workload.

Programme management

The programme has largely delivered on its KPIs and funds have been awarded against the projected profile to projects that fulfil the programme goals, in a programme that has been over-subscribed three fold. There has been significant assessment workload in the final phase of awards and the

Access to Nature team has demonstrated a high level of commitment to the programme. The national team was re-structured in 2010 and this has taken some time to bed in and for relative areas of responsibility to become clear.

Project delivery

There are high levels of confidence among projects that they are on schedule to achieve what they set out to do and that they can deliver on their outcomes. There is currently little evaluative evidence to support such claims, but there is an overall sense of projects getting on with their job in what is an increasingly difficult operating climate. The fact that a high proportion are similarly confident that they are on track to complete their evaluation reports gives the evaluators confidence that more complete data will be available on projects impact to inform evaluation report three in December 2011.

4. Recommendations and next steps

Recommendations

There is no doubt that the Access to Nature programme has achieved a lot to date: application and assessment processes have been put in place and completed; KPIs have largely been achieved; staff have worked 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 projects are largely confident they can deliver what they set out to do.

It is clear however, that alongside these considerable successes, the Access to Nature programme has faced and continues to face some challenges. The recommendations arising from the findings summarised here have been aggregated into four key areas.

Consolidating the Access to Nature team and procedures to meet current and future needs – further work on role definition within the national team; completing a delegated authority paper; ongoing training for Regional Advisers on the grant management function; reviewing terms of reference for the Project Board and Steering Group; addressing the question of a champion / champions for Access to Nature; assessing future staffing levels based on grant distribution and workload and the Natural England operating context.

Improving the quality of data on the programme – continue the review of projects outcomes; ensure staff and projects understand what is required of the Quarterly Progress Reports; provide training / briefing on data collection methods and assessment; be clear why data is being collected and

what it will be used for; apply consistent recording systems for data collation purposes.

Provide adequate support to projects on evaluation – review evaluation resources; ensure Regional Advisers are in touch with projects about their evaluations; consider an on-line shared practice / learning resource.

Ensuring the learning from this programme is applied – commitment made to the post report action planning process; links made to the Changing Spaces evaluation board; learning from this evaluation used to inform the development of the Access to Nature successor scheme.

Next steps

The picture this evaluation report paints is of a programme that has delivered to date under increasing strain due to a late bulge of applications. A clear area of focus for the coming year must be on ensuring there is sufficient data, of a good enough quality, to help the national team and Regional Advisers know whether projects are on track, to inform later evaluation reports, and to assess impact of the programme specifically.

The role of formative evaluation like this is to inform change. An action planning session has been held with the Access to Nature team to consider the recommendations included in this report and to agree how to take them forward.