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Partnership Working in a Place

Understanding success factors for nature recovery partnerships

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Report for

Natural England NECR637

Project Team

Clare Twigger-Ross

Rolands Sadauskis

Hannah Gillie

Madelyn Robertson

Tom Crick

Approved by

Yvonne Rees

(Project Director)

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Eunomia Research & Consulting Ltd
37 Queen Square
Bristol
BS1 4QS
United Kingdom

Tel +44 (0)117 9172250
Fax +44 (0)8717 142942
Web www.eunomia.co.uk

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Foreword

The Nature Returns (aka Nature-based solutions for climate change at the landscape scale) Programme was developed to meet the strategic need to pilot and build the evidence base for nature-based solutions for climate change mitigation. Nature Returns is a £17.5 million programme first established in 2021 which is funded by the Treasury's Shared Outcomes Fund, co-sponsored by Defra, and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. The fund seeks to increase cross-government collaboration and address society's most challenging problems including biodiversity loss, climate change and land use change.

Nature Returns is funding the delivery of six landscape partnership projects, spread across England from Northumberland to Plymouth, focusing on habitat creation and restoration to enable the effectiveness of these habitats to sequester carbon to be monitored. Alongside this, we are working with the partnership projects to develop and/ or support collaborative engagement approaches for land use change, and to develop financial plans for revenue generation for maintenance and further restoration via innovative funding.

This report has been commissioned through the Nature Returns Programme with the aim of building capacity and collaboration by developing a better understanding of the interactions and relations between Defra's Arms-Length Body (ALB) organisations (Natural England, Environment Agency, and Forestry Commission) at both a national and local level. An independent, Programme-wide evaluation has been undertaken; this report complements the evaluation report by focussing on a specific area of work and including views from staff in geographically based ALB teams as well as staff working directly on the Programme.

The overall aim of the study was to understand how we can work better together in a place to:

1. Understand the factors that enable a successful establishment of nature recovery focused partnerships, using the six pilot projects as examples;

2. Understand how these partnerships interact with Defra ALBs (locally based and national team staff) in a place, and the challenges they face;

3. Understand the structures and support that the ALBs can give to partnerships to help them establish effective partnerships,

4. Understand how processes and structures within the three ALBs work together to provide support, or form barriers, to the delivery of nature recovery in a place and

5. Identify common elements or best practice that could be replicated going forwards to benefit both ALBs and local partnerships, as well as any recurring issues to be avoided going forwards.

The findings from this research will be used to identify opportunities to build working relations and capacity across all three ALBs, both locally and nationally.

Disclaimer:

Natural England commission a range of reports from external contractors to provide evidence and advice to assist us in delivering our duties. The views in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Natural England.

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Working together to build the evidence for nature-based solutions to climate change and biodiversity loss

Executive Summary

Aims and Approach

This report presents the findings from research into how partnerships can work more effectively in a place to achieve environmental outcomes. The research focussed on six local partnership projects funded under the Nature Returns Programme[1], which aims to test approaches for effectively integrating nature-based solutions into wider land management objectives at a landscape scale.

The study sought to understand 'working together' from three perspectives: I) the local partnership project perspective; II) the national arm's length body (ALB) programme team perspective, and III) the ALB area team perspective. Therefore, the study examines local partnerships as well as how Defra's ALBs - the Environment Agency (EA), Forestry Commission (FC) and Natural England (NE) - are working together, and with local partnerships, to support the delivery of nature recovery on the ground.

The methodology combined a focused literature review on enablers and barriers to partnership working, with stakeholder engagement. The stakeholder engagement gathered perspectives and experiences of partnership working to support the development of nature recovery projects in specific places. In total, fifteen interviews and focus groups were held with 37 people, including representatives from the six local partnership projects and Defra ALB local/area and national staff. The focus of the interviews was to understand the relationships and processes developing in and around the six local partnership projects, where these were working well, challenges and barriers, and to capture good practices. A separate evaluation, conducted by ICF, is assessing the impacts of the six local partnership projects.

Key Findings

Stakeholder engagement with the local partnership projects and ALB staff highlighted five key success factors for effective partnership working. First, having a shared vision was considered crucial for helping partnerships to strategise and engage external partners. Taking time at the start to clarify this vision and understand each partner's perspectives was seen as critical. Second, strong working relationships, often built on pre-existing connections, enabled trust, efficiency, and high-quality delivery. Staff consistency was noted as important for fostering these relationships. Third, involving a broad spectrum of the 'right' partners, such as landowners and community groups, provided partnerships with diverse skillsets, decision-making abilities, and local buy-in. Fourth, creating a collaborative approach through trust, openness and positive attitudes helped build social capital and overcome differences between partners. Finally, effective, and regular communication was essential, with early in-person engagement followed by consistent virtual contact identified as good practices. These are in line with factors associated with the development of relationships and plans often linked to the early stages of partnership building identified in the literature.

Interactions between the local partnership projects and Defra ALBs occurred both formally and informally. All partnerships had regular, formalised contact with national NE staff through the Nature Returns programme. Engagement with local NE field teams was also common across projects. Interactions with the EA and FC were more ad hoc and depended on the specific interventions being delivered and technical needs of each project. Site visits, technical support, knowledge sharing, and engagement at project scoping stages were the main reasons for interaction between partnerships and

[1] The Nature Returns Programme (formerly Nature-based Solutions for Climate Change at the Landscape Scale) aims to test approaches for effectively integrating Nature-based Solutions (NbS) into wider land management objectives. Led by Natural England, the Nature Returns Programme is being delivered together with Defra's other arms-length bodies (ALBs), namely the Environment Agency (EA), Forestry Commission (FC) and Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew at their Wakehurst campus.

ALB staff. While many of these interactions were viewed positively, challenges were also reported, including low or limited engagement with ALBs and delays/technical issues with the funding programme.

There are ALB processes and structures which support partnership working for nature recovery in a place. These were reported by local partnership project interviewees and ALB interviewees at local/area and national level, and include: strong interpersonal relationships, especially at the local officer level and around some priority or protected habitats. Processes like the development of LNRS and, in some regions, groups like WISP and the Northeast Natural Environment Leaders Group have provided coordinating mechanisms which enabled closer working between ALBs. Ways of Working documents have been used within Nature Returns and in other funding programmes to set frameworks and expectations around how ALB staff should work together. Knowledge sharing between ALBs, such as deep dives into technical topics, was also noted as beneficial.

There are also ALB processes and structures which present challenges for partnership working for nature recovery in a place. Local partnership project and ALB interviewees referred to short funding cycles and difficult procurement processes which can make long-term planning and partnership building challenging, while exacerbating the impacts of staff turnover. Limited alignment on objectives, language, and geographical boundaries between ALBs creates challenges for communication and collaboration. Moreover, the findings suggest limited mechanisms for ALBs to come together, nationally, and regionally, to discuss common ALB goals and potential conflicts, or if these do exist, they are not consistent across the country.

To improve alignment, ALB interviewees highlighted three key actions. Firstly, the need to create and prioritise a culture of collaboration across ALBs, potentially driven by Defra. Cross-ALB training on key technical topics and ways of working was also suggested to build shared understanding and approaches. Developing a strategic, cross-ALB view on land use was seen as a way to provide clarity on ALB priorities and targets in a place, to reduce friction and increase efficiency.

Various structures and support for establishing nature recovery partnerships were recommended by interviewees. These suggestions chiefly related to funding, roles and points of contacts, technical delivery support, engagement processes and consents and regulation. Interviewees highlighted the need for longer-term funding cycles to account for seasonality and enable partnership building. Clearly defining roles and responsibilities between ALB partners, providing cross-ALB contact points, and offering additional technical support on topics like carbon accounting, legal issues and landowner engagement were also suggested. Earlier and more extensive engagement from ALBs during project development stages and through forums was seen as valuable for identifying issues, sharing learning, and strengthening partnerships.

Recommendations

Interviewees made several suggestions for structures and support to enhance partnership working and which relate to funding, roles and communication, technical delivery, consents, and regulation. We have considered these and wider points in developing our recommendations for Natural England to enable good practices across their areas and projects. A summarised version of the recommendations is provided below:

1. **Work together with other National ALBs to provide clear strategic direction**

   I. **Create and prioritise a culture and expectation of working together between ALBs** nationally that filters down to local/area levels. This includes making Ways of Working documents more well-known across ALB staff, creating a cross-ALB flow chart or organogram and a shared place-based resource setting out points of contact and roles.

   II. **Bring ALB staff at a regional level together to build relationships:** create a mechanism, such as an annual in-person meeting, which enables staff from across the EA, FC, and NE to come together

at a regional level with the purpose of building relationships. This could include identifying opportunities for shared office space within a region.

III. **Help build connections between the ALBs and improve staff understanding of each other's objectives, priorities, and operating procedures at all levels:** this could be achieved in a number of ways, for example, using cross-ALB training (as for LNRS which was highlighted as good practice) and simple solutions such as using shared office space, establishing secondment opportunities (several mentioned the advantages of having worked in other ALBs previously).

IV. **Establish an agreed vision for partnership working for the Nature Returns Programme across ALBs at a national level:** The EA, FC and NE should come together at national level to discuss partnership working to develop a shared understanding of what 'partnership working' is and when it is desirable/useful for project delivery. Ultimately the ALBs need to agree on whether partnership working has a value, in all or some situations and agree a position on the level of partnership required going forward.

V. To inform the vision on partnership working, NE and other national ALBs should **consider the relationship, if any, between effective partnership working and effective project delivery.** This could be done by reflecting on the ICF evaluation of the Nature Returns programme together with the findings in this report.

VI. **Develop a decision tree for when to use partnerships and which type of relationship will best meet the objectives of the project.** Natural England should develop a decision tree to support choices around when to use partnerships and the types of relationships which may be suitable in different situations.

VII. **Develop a joined up strategic, cross-ALB, view on delivery priorities for future partnership/nature recovery programmes**. In part, this consensus view will be informed by the Land-use Framework when published. Although it is difficult to pre-agree positions on all issues where priorities may conflict, as a starting point, NE could list the key technical disagreements emerging from this round of projects, facilitate discussion between the experts at the national or local levels, and share agreed decisions to indicate the likely position on similar challenges.

2. **Clarify roles, responsibilities, expectations, and relationships**

I. **Clarify roles and responsibilities within a programme at all levels and between ALBs.** ALB staff should consider together what structures, i.e., governance structures, are needed to facilitate local delivery on the ground. This may be different for each ALB, depending on their respective roles in the programme, and thus an open and early discussion would help to clarify expectations going forward.

II. **Clarify expectations on local teams:** when coordinating a programme, Natural England should provide clarity on what is expected of area/local teams, particularly around roles and responsibilities in partnership working. The partnerships should also be made aware of all roles and how these relate to their activities and the roles of the NE project co-ordinator.

III. **Recognise the crucial role of relationships and require a full and proper handover to avoid setbacks.** Ensure partners and ALB staff have time to build relationships. If staff leave, or change roles, there should be sufficient handover periods to ensure new staff are properly introduced to contacts and have a good understanding of the relationships held by the former employee (including unresolved issues, challenges, or opportunities). This should help minimise disruption for local partners and ensure points of communication are not lost.

3. **Funding, consents, and regulation**

I. **Explore opportunities with Defra and Treasury for multi-year and/or more flexible funding and delivery requirements** recognising that partnerships take time to build and that environmental conditions can disrupt planned delivery.

II. **Explore opportunities with to improve visibility and communication of funding programmes available in a locality**. This could involve creating overview pages on the Defra website, showing how funding streams are connected as well as more widespread promotion of funding available using existing websites such as the CaBA website. NE could follow-up with the partnership projects to ask specifically how this could be achieved.

III. **Explore the potential to align or automate consents for nature-based projects**. NE should facilitate a conversation with operational departments across the ALBs to discuss opportunities to overcome this barrier to progress highlighted by interviews who suggested better alignment could be achieved through templates, joint formats and staff training across ALBs.

4. **Provide specific support to local partnerships**

I. **Have a longer project development stage to discuss project ideas thoroughly with partners at pre-application:** Pre-application discussions should as far as possible include some of the 'difficult' conversations around land-use priorities and should be escalated to national experts to resolve contentious issues as far as possible before the project starts.

II. **Hold start-up meetings with each local project** to include all relevant area ALB staff and the local delivery partners which have received funding. This would provide an opportunity for:

a. Introductions between the project delivery team, the ALB programme staff and, crucially, other ALB area staff beyond the programme who may be able to support delivery;

b. Confirming communication channels and timing, in particular to identify the role of the NE pilot co-ordinator and of other ALB support staff. This should also set out what information/input is required and when;

c. Setting expectations about partnership working and delivery;

d. Identifying and discussing risks for project delivery, which might for example include misaligned objectives for the area, lack of key skills, or poor relationships between key stakeholders, and to identify mitigation measures to reduce these risks; and

e. Sign-posting to local and national support that can be provided and how to access this. From the local partnership projects' self-assessment (see section 4.3.2), drawing on local and national support was reported as low or medium by four of the six interviewees. Communicating ALB area staff positions and roles beyond the programme would help local partnerships identify points of contacts within ALBs where these relationships do not already exist.

III. **Develop guidance for local lead partners, supported by ALBS, to establish strong partnership working.** Guidance could include:

a. A checklist of actions which local partnerships and ALBs can take to help develop a partnership or strong partnership working. For example, initial steps may include baseline mapping to identify ongoing related work, any specificities of place and stakeholder mapping. This could be followed by how to set up a partnership, establish ways of working and terms of reference, develop a vision, action plan and funding programme. For local partnership projects, these steps could be set out in funding conditions if a partnership or partnership working is required. Guidance on these steps has been produced for other partnership programmes and could be adapted.

b. Sign-posting to information on 'tips and trips', as captured in this report, and which could be consolidated and supported with a library of case-studies.

c. Recommendations to self-evaluate the maturity of partnerships using tools identified in this literature review and used briefly in stakeholder engagement in this study.

IV. **Encourage cross-project peer to peer learning by promoting the programme and including learning events**. Feedback indicated that shared learning events were valued but came too late. We would recommend that NE:

a. **Host an in-person programme launch event** with relevant ALB experts and all local partners/bodies responsible for delivering the projects (i.e., those local partnership projects which have received funding). This launch event should also initiate a peer-to-peer learning process across local partnership projects.

b. **Programme regular on-line learning events** including simple facilitated sharing sessions (in addition to the focussed training sessions) so that lead partners can exchange experiences and through peer-to-peer learning help to solve challenges.

V. **Ask partnerships early on about specific support needs**. For the Nature Returns local partnership projects, interviewees flagged additional support needed around: evidence and technical support regarding carbon accounting; legal advice around landowners selling their land under a project and around the structure of landowner payments, including amounts and who bears the risk; and guidance and funding for coordination e.g., engagement with partners and landowners.

VI. **Provide local partnership projects with updated consolidated briefings on relevant national environmental policy**, the purpose being to acknowledge areas of policy/delivery tension and to outline how any land-use conflicts can be avoided. In the future, this briefing could draw upon the proposed national land use framework.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Overview

This project, commissioned by Natural England, focussed on the Nature Returns Programme and its six local partnership projects. The project explored how partnerships can work effectively in a place to achieve environmental outcomes and at how Defra's arms-length bodies (ALBs), namely the Environment Agency (EA), Forestry Commission (FC), and Natural England (NE), are working together, and with the partnerships, to support delivery of nature recovery on the ground.

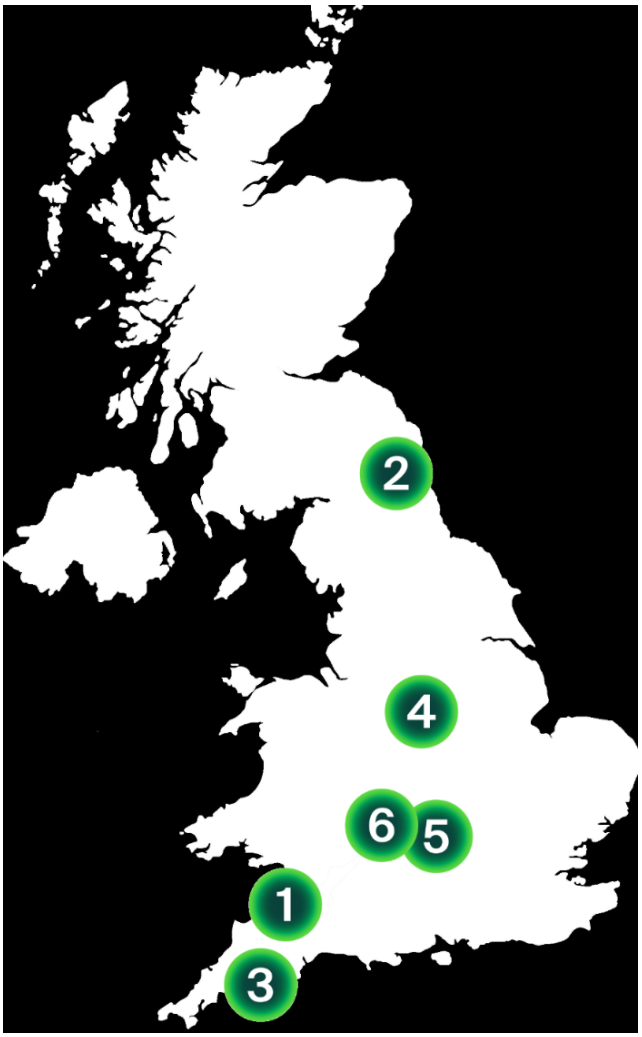
This report presents the findings from desk-based and primary research into the success factors and the challenges of partnership working, highlights good practices and makes recommendations for how Natural England and its partner ALBs can further support local partnership working for nature.

1.2 The Nature Returns Programme

Nature-based solutions (NbS), designed to protect, restore, and sustainably manage ecosystems are increasingly being seen as a way to address multiple environmental challenges, such as climate change and biodiversity, whilst also helping with societal issues like human wellbeing. The Nature Returns Programme (formerly Nature-based Solutions for Climate Change at the Landscape Scale) aims to test approaches for effectively integrating Nature-based Solutions (NbS) into wider land management objectives.

Figure 1-1 Map of Nature Returns local partnership projects and lead partners

Led by Natural England, the Nature Returns Programme is being delivered together with Defra's other arms-length bodies (ALBs), namely the Environment Agency (EA), Forestry Commission (FC) and Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew at their Wakehurst campus. In February 2023, £4.3 million of funding was provided to support six local partnership projects across England (see figure 1-1).



Key

1: Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration project – National Trust

2: Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change – Groundwork North East & Cumbria

3: Plymouth Natural Grid – Plymouth City Council

4: Derwent Valley Living Forest – Derbyshire Wildlife Trust

5: Oxfordshire – Buckinghamshire Freshwater Network – Freshwater Habitats Trust

6: Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery – Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust

Figure 1-1. Locations of the Nature Returns Local Partnership projects

The funding included grant payments for capital interventions, staff costs, engagement work and securing permissions, but not for buying land. Funding contracts were initiated in January/February 2023 and are due to close on the 31st March 2024. The programme also includes upfront lump sum maintenance payments to maintain the habitats created for at least 10 years. The grant payments factored in inflation and budgets could not be transferred across financial years. Natural England is in the process of extending the programme funding for 2024/25.

These six partnership projects are focused on creating and restoring habitat at a landscape scale and will monitor how carbon is captured across different habitat types. A further ambition of the programme is to demonstrate how these local partnership projects can maximise environmental outcomes through blending public and private funding and finance.

A team of local advisers from Natural England are working closely with the local partnership projects and with wider ALB area teams situated in each location. Many partnerships were already working with Defra ALB staff in area teams before receiving funding under the Nature Returns Programme. An overview of each of the partnerships is provided in

Table 1-1.

Table 1-1 Overview of nature returns local partnership projects

Project and location	Lead Partner	Funding	Key Objectives
Derwent Living Forest Project Derbyshire	Derbyshire Wildlife Trust (DWT)	£645,000	Habitat creation and restoration to connect the Northern Forest to the National Forest. To maximise ecosystem services e.g. carbon sequestration, flood risk reduction, mental health improvement.
Ox-Bucks Freshwater Network Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire	Freshwater Habitats Trust	Over £780,000	Restoring small wetlands including tree-removal from peat, species-rich grassland creation and restoration (including arable reversion) and clean water pond creation.
Plymouth Natural Grid Plymouth	Plymouth City Council	Approx £1 million	Habitat creation and restoration in the urban environment to maximise carbon sequestration opportunities e.g., wood pasture, floodplain, grassland, scrub, and saltmarsh restoration/creation.
Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery Gloucestershire	Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust	£417,000	To restore 500-hectares of naturally functioning and climate resilient habitats within the Hasfield Estate. To monitor and help quantify carbon sequestration and greenhouse gas emissions in semi-natural habitats.
Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change Northumberland	Groundwork Northeast and Cumbria	Approx £600,000	To create/restore six priority habitats, over 10 sites across three estates, contributing to wider restoration of the River Wansbeck catchment. To show how landowners can come together to reduce emissions and promote carbon storage.
Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration Project Devon	The National Trust	~ £1million	To repurpose nature poor agricultural land for nature recovery across the 670-hectare Watersmeet Estate. To build resilience into habitats and protected sites by reconnecting woodlands, creating wood pasture, and expanding heath.

Source: UK Government (2023) and stakeholder engagement[2]

1.3 Project Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of the project was to understand how to work together better in a place. The study focused on the six local partnership projects outlined above in order to examine how nature recovery

[2] Pioneering nature projects launched to test carbon capture methods in fight against climate change (2023) UK Government. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pioneering-nature-projects-launched-to-test-carbon-capture-methods-in-fight-against-climate-change

partnerships can successfully establish, how these partnerships interact with Defra ALBs and how the Defra ALBs interact and work together to support nature recovery partnerships in a place. The study sought to understand partnership working from three perspectives, as set out in **Error! Reference source n ot found.** below.

Figure 12 Three perspectives of partnership working

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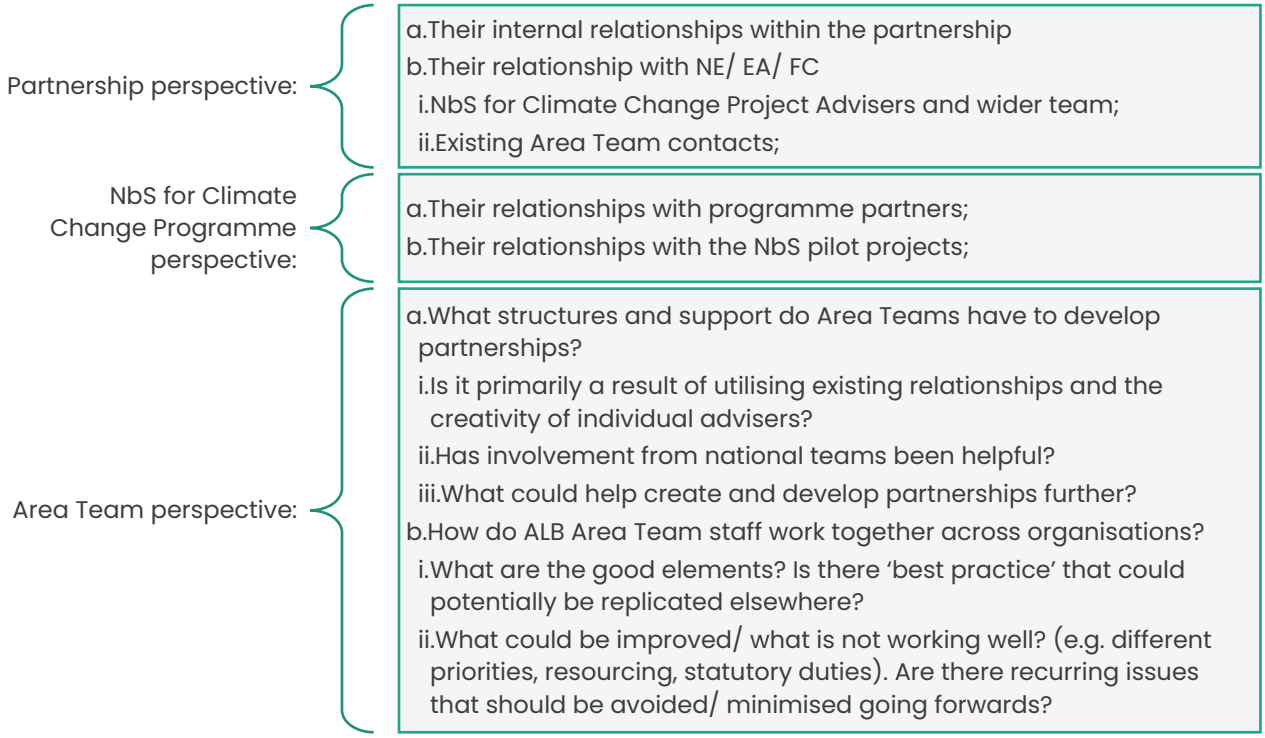


To deliver the project aims, the project team together with Natural England, developed five research questions, which are as follows:

1. What are the factors that enable the successful establishment of nature recovery focused partnerships, using the six local partnership projects as examples?

2. How do these local partnership projects interact with Defra ALBs (locally based and national team staff) in a place, and what are the challenges they face when doing so?

3. What structures and support can the ALBs give to help the effective establishment of partnerships for nature recovery? How do NE take good practice and enable it across their areas and projects?

4. Focussing on the context of Nature Returns Programme, how do processes and structures within the three ALBs work together to provide support or present barriers for nature recovery in a place?

    a. How can the ALBs ensure they are aligned in delivery, that outcomes are complimentary and that their processes and duties are streamlined?

    b. Are there processes for resolving disagreements between ALBs and ways to support each other's priorities?

    c. Are there barriers to working effectively together to achieve agreed outcomes?

5. To what extent are there common elements or best practice that could be replicated going forwards to benefit both ALBs and local partnerships, and are there recurring issues which should be avoided going forwards? What are the barriers to good practice?

The findings of this study seek to answer these five research questions by exploring how the six local partnership projects have been working to date and how local, area and national staff within the EA, FC and NE are working to support these projects in specific places. Importantly, the research provides insight into success factors, challenges and good practices for partnership working which is applicable to nature recovery beyond the Nature Returns Programme. This exploration was designed following a short literature review on the enablers and barriers to partnership working to ensure the research builds on previous analyses of partnership working (see Section 2).

1.4 Report Structure

This report is structured as follows:

- **Section 2.0 Approach:** sets out the project research methods;
- **Section 3.0 Literature Review:** presents the findings from a focused review of literature on the success factors and challenges for partnership working;
- **Section 4.0 Stakeholder Engagement:** presents and analyses the findings from stakeholder engagement, structured according to the five research questions; and
- **Section 5.0 Discussion and Recommendations:** summarises the key findings and reflects on the wider implications of the research.

2.0 Approach

2.1 Overview

This research project included the following tasks, each discussed in turn below:

1. **A focussed literature review** - recent research on partnership working and collaborative engagement to collate evidence on the factors for successful partnerships, as well as barriers and challenges for partnership working;

2. **Stakeholder engagement** – via interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders (i.e. the local partnership projects, Defra ALB advisors and area and national staff) to gather their perspectives, experiences of partnership working to support the development of nature recovery projects in a specific place.

2.2 Focused Literature Review

A focused review of literature was conducted to collate evidence on the factors for successful partnerships and the barriers and challenges for partnership working. The primary source of material was work undertaken by the research team to review the effectiveness of local partnerships piloted in recent years. Additional insight was gathered from a short review of wider literature on partnership working for nature recovery.

Although much of the research in this review was conducted several years ago and investigates partnerships focused on different environmental problems to those of the Nature Returns local partnership projects, the findings remain informative as the analysis was conducted on partnerships at a similar development stage to the Nature Returns projects and their aims have considerable overlap. This is shown in Table 2-1, which compares the spatial scale, scope, and maturity of the Nature Returns local partnership projects to the partnerships analysed in previous studies. The comparison highlights the following:

- The partnerships in the literature were assessed at a similar level of maturity to the current Nature Returns local partnership projects. For instance, many of the pilot Catchment Based Approach (CaBA) and Nature Improvement Areas (NIA) partnerships were based on existing partnerships that were rapidly expanding into the wider role needed for the schemes. The lessons learnt are highly relevant for this stage of the Nature Returns partnership development.
- The partnerships in the literature focus on a wide range of environmental issues, including water, flood resilience, catchment management and nature improvement with considerable overlap to the Nature Returns local partnership projects. This is particularly so for the partnerships set up to drive action in the NIAs.
- Both CaBA and the NIA partnerships had the objective to attract private finance and become self-sufficient. The partnerships were both successful in attracting on average more than three times the core income from a mix of other private and public sources, with specific CaBA partnerships attracting much higher levels of funding. The CaBA partnerships continue to receive core funding from Defra but at a lower level than during the pilot exercise.
- The Nature Returns local partnership projects are operating at a smaller scale than either the average CaBA or the NIA partnerships but are funded at a higher level than either of these two previous local partnership schemes, with the potential for maintenance funding for at least 10 years.

Table 2-1 Comparison of Nature Returns local partnership projects with partnerships analysed in previous studies

Partnership evaluations	Spatial scale	Scope	Maturity/Date established	Funding
Nature Returns Local Partnership Projects (2024 +1 year)	Six local partnership projects across England at landscape scale of > 500 ha each.	Nature-based solutions for carbon capture, climate adaptation, and to improve land, water, and nature.	Projects began in 2023, but using existing partnerships was a condition of the grant meaning years in operation vary.	£4.3 million in total. Each partnership receiving £417k – £1 million from Feb 2023 to March 2024. Aiming to attract alternative funding.
Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas, Defra (2015)[3]	10,000-50,000 ha each.	Nature improvement.	New or much expanded partnerships formed and studied during three years of establishment.	12 projects each granted £555-771k over three years from 2013-2015. Attracted income >3:1 and developed self-funded business plans until 2020.
Flood Resilience Community Pathfinders Flood Resilience Community Pathfinder Evaluation, Defra (2015)[4] and Evidence Review of the Concept of the Flood Resilience, Defra (2020)[5]	13 community-based partnerships – varied in scale	Community resilience activities including awareness raising, river monitoring, alleviation, and adaptation, specifically property flood resilience measures.	Mostly new partnerships, studied during early years of establishment and five years after, led by local authorities often in conjunction with the National Flood Forum.	The programme was £5 million with 13 projects receiving between £200 – 400 k over a 2-year period. Most areas left a legacy of community flood groups linked into local democratic structures. Funding was focussed on catalysing activity up until 2015.
Catchment Based Approach (CaBA) partnerships Evaluation of the Catchment Based Approach Pilot Stage, Defra (2013)[6] and Phase 2, (2015) Framework for the monitoring and evaluation of catchment partnership working, Baxter et.al (2018)[7]	Water catchment. Over 100 in England averaging around 1,300 ha.	Focussed on water quality, but included water quantity, biodiversity, climate resilience and land management.	Piloted in 2011, but some based on existing partnerships. Rolled out nationally in 2013. Evaluated during set-up, and after two- and five-years operation.	20 initial pilots each receiving £60k per year for two years rolled out to 100+ at lower-level funding. Aim to be self-sufficient. Attracted income >3:1 some much larger. Core funding now £15k per year per catchment.

[3] Collingwood Environmental Planning (2015) Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Final Report (2012-2015), accessed 14 November 2023, https://documentcloud.adobe.com/spodintegration/index.html?locale=en-us.

[4] Defra (2015) Flood Resilience Community Pathfinder Evaluation: Final Evaluation Report. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60351b74e90e0766047734be/13185_FD2664_FloodResilienceCommunityPathfinderSchemeEvaluation_FR.pdf

[5] Defra (2020) Evidence Review of Concept of the Flood Resilience. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6038c4e28fa8f50495bda31d/14817_Finalreport_resilience.pdf

[6] Evaluation of the Catchment Based Approach 2013.pdf

[7] Baxter, D., Rees, Y., and Chowdhury, T. (2018) Framework for the monitoring and evaluation of catchment partnership working

Other relevant research	Spatial scale	Scope	Maturity/Date established	Funding
Within sector and cross-sector partnerships, including CaBA, NIAs, Local Nature Partnerships, and local government Local delivery of the 25 Year Environment Plan, Defra (2020)[8]	Various.	All aspects of 25YEP, water, air, land, nature, flooding.	Various.	N/A
Natural Course collaborative programme Natural Course Regional Water Governance Study, EA (2020-2021)[9]	County (Cumbria/ Northwest River Basin District).	Focussed on water, but also how water relates to land and nature management.	Considered workings of long-running arms-length bodies (ALBs) as well as CaBA partnerships and local flood groups.	N/A

2.3 Stakeholder Engagement

2.3.1 Data Collection

A key objective of this project was to understand the perspectives and experiences of partnership working from the six local partnership projects, Defra ALB local advisors and area team staff. The specific relationships/partnerships which Natural England were interested in exploring included:

- within the six local partnership projects;[10]
- between the six local partnership projects and ALB area teams;
- between ALB area teams;
- between the local partnership projects and ALBs at the national level; and
- between ALBs at the national level.

NE fieldwork staff were also part of the Nature Returns programme, although relationships with these Workstream 2 staff were not investigated. To examine the connections and interactions listed above, a total of 15 interviews and focus groups were conducted with 37 people.

One-to-one structured interviews were carried out with the six local partnership projects, half of which were attended by two team members from the local partnership projects. These interviews were delivered online in January 2024 and lasted 45-60 minutes. The interview questions covered the set-up of each local partnership, how the partnership works/functions, their interactions with Defra ALB staff at

[8] Orr, P., Morse-Jones, S., Aboud, N., et al. (2019) *25 Year Environment Plan Local Delivery: Enhancing Local Delivery and Implementation Through Strengthening Stakeholder Relationships, Integration, and Leadership. A report to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)*

[9] Rees, Y., Duffield, L., and Richards, R. (2021) *Water Governance Study - Phase 2 Report v2.1.pdf*, accessed 14 November 2023, https://documentcloud.adobe.com/spodintegration/index.html?locale=en-us – see also Phase 1 report v1.0.pdf ,

[10] A requirement for funding was that local partnership projects were established but the levels of partnership vary. Some are collaborations between multiple interests and others are single landholders.

various levels, what has been successful and the challenges they have faced. Each partnership also completed a self-assessment table based on the key success factors for partnership working identified in Baxter et al (2018) for catchment partnerships.[11] The self-assessment table and key interview questions can be found in Appendix A.1.1.

Small focus groups were conducted with the relevant ALB local and area staff. Focus group sizes ranged from four to six people and were conducted online between December 2023 and January 2024. The focus groups were organised according to local partnership project/region. The purpose being to not only gather the necessary information, but to support capacity building across the Defra ALB staff who are allocated to each project. Depending on their role and position, some interviewees attended more than one focus group. The set up and attendees for each focus group are presented in Table 2-2 below.

In addition to the ALB staff working directly on the Nature Returns Programme, a number of focus group attendees had broader partnership working roles within their respective ALBs. These interviewees provided insight on partnership working across Defra programmes within specific regions. This was valuable for identifying common elements of good practice, recurring issues to be avoided and good practice examples. Key interview questions for the focus groups can be found in Appendix A.1.2.

Table 2-2 Focus group set up and attendees

No.	Relevant local partnership project(s)	Region	Number of Attendees	Position and Organisation of Attendees
1	Ox-Bucks Freshwater Network	Oxfordshire/ Buckingham-shire/ South-East England	Six	1. Catchment Coordinator, Thames Area, Environment Agency 2. Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) Senior Adviser, Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, Natural England 3. Senior Adviser – Nature Returns Programme, Natural England 4. Catchment Manager (Essex), Environment Programme Team, East Anglia Area, Environment Agency 5. Local Nature Recovery Advisor (1), Southeast and London, Forestry Commission 6. Local Nature Recovery Advisor (2), Southeast and London, Forestry Commission
2	Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change	Northumber-land/ North-east England	Four	1. River basin coordinator, Newcastle, and LNRS senior advisor for Northumberland and north of Tyne, Natural England. 2. Partnership and expertise manager, Northeast England, Forestry Commission 3. Tyne Catchment Coordinator, Environment Agency 4. Senior Advisor - Nature Returns Programme, Natural England

[11] Baxter, D., Rees, Y., and Chowdhury, T. (2018) *Framework for the monitoring and evaluation of catchment partnership working*

No.	Relevant local partnership project(s)	Region	Number of Attendees	Position and Organisation of Attendees
3	Derwent Forest Project	Derwent/ Derbyshire/ East Midlands	Four	1. Senior Advisor – Nature Returns Programme, Natural England 2. LNRS Senior Adviser for Derbyshire, Natural England 3. Natural Course Programme Manager, Environment Agency 4. Strategic Senior Flood Risk Management Advisor, Partnership and Strategic Overview - East Midlands Area, Environment Agency
4	Severn Solutions for Nature Recovery, Plymouth Natural Grid and Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration Project	Southwest England	Five	1. Senior Advisor for the Nature Recovery Network in Wessex, Natural England 2. Senior Adviser – Nature Returns Programme Natural England 3. Catchment Coordinator - Tamar Management Catchment, Environment Agency 4. Partnership and Expertise Manager for Southwest England, Forestry Commission 5. Nature Recovery Advisor southwest, supporting the Nature Returns projects in the southwest, Forestry Commission

Interviews were conducted with staff members from each national ALB rather than using cross-ALB focus groups, as the focus was not on capacity building. Some interviews were individual, and others were with two or three interviewees. The number, position and role of the national ALB staff interviewed are presented in Table 2-3. The interview questions for the national ALB staff can be found in Appendix A.1.3.

Table 2-3 Defra ALB national staff interviews

Focus group /interview number	Defra ALB	Number of Interviewees
1	Forestry Commission	Two
2	Forestry Commission	One
3	Environment Agency	Two
4	Natural England	One
5	Natural England	Three

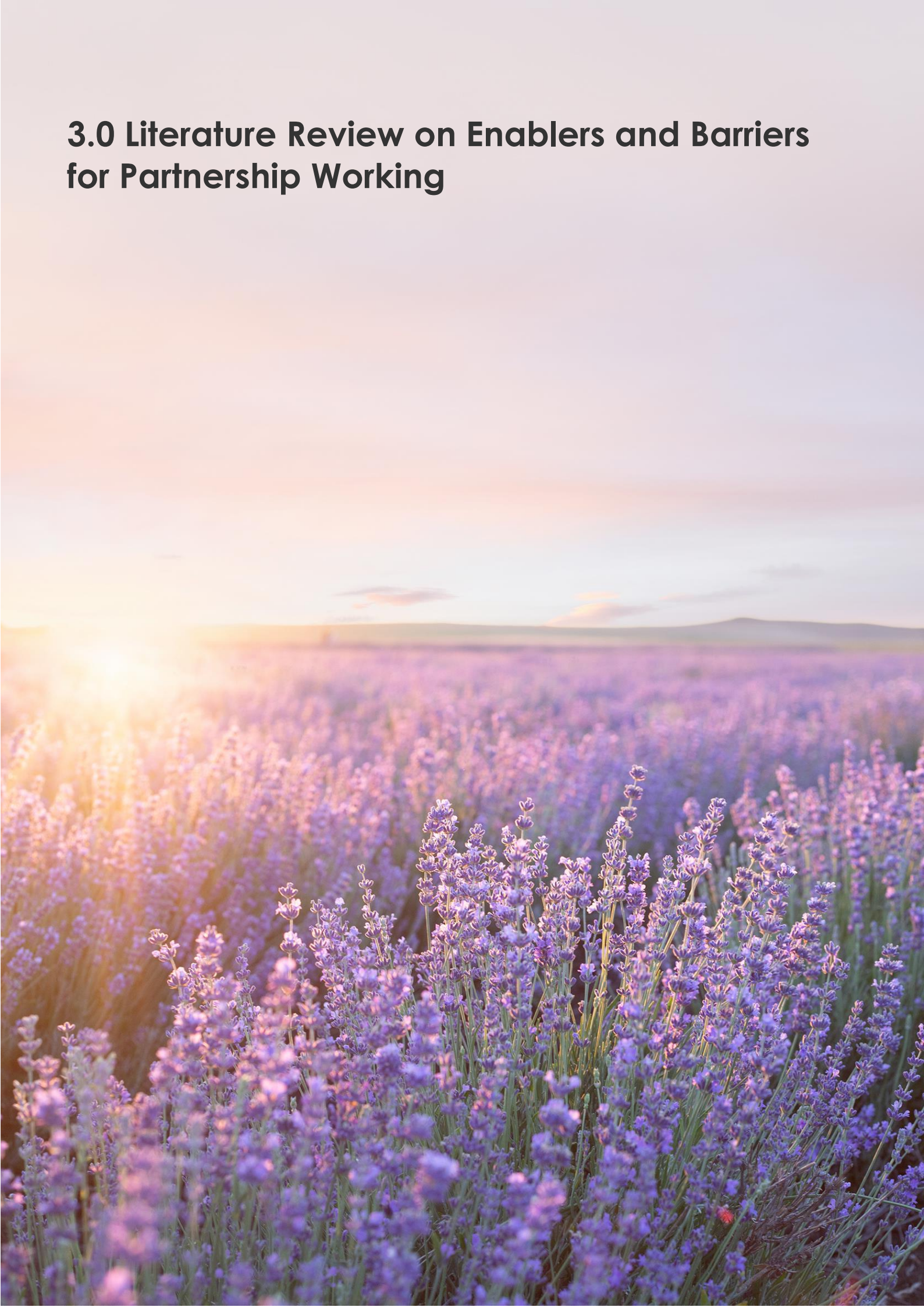
2.3.2 Data Analysis

Detailed notes were taken during each interview and focus group and recorded in Excel spreadsheets. The notes/transcripts were cleaned, re-read and several broad initial codes identified. These codes had emerged prior to and during the research process, including from the literature review. Using the

qualitative data analysis software Dedoose, the interview transcripts were coded. Groups of codes were created in Dedoose from which key themes were evaluated, organised, and interpreted using Memos. Using the outputs from Dedoose, further analysis was then conducted by research question.

The findings are presented by research question and reflected on by theme. The local partnership project interviews, focus groups and national ALB staff interviews have been given identification codes to protect anonymity. The ID code system is presented in Appendix A.1.4.

3.0 Literature Review on Enablers and Barriers for Partnership Working



3.1 The Need for Partnership Working

Addressing the climate and biodiversity crises will require a change in how land in England is used and managed. These environmental challenges spread across administrative boundaries and mean that coordinated decision-making, input of multiple perspectives, and collaborative action is increasingly important.

Partnerships enable stakeholders to come together to discuss their perspectives, to share differences and commonalities. They can help multiple actors make decisions collaboratively and understand how they can achieve common goals by sharing resources, power, risk, and ownership.[12,13] Working with partners helps ensure that hierarchies and power differences are distributed across multi-actor networks, recognising that no one actor can be in control.

Ultimately, effective partnership working encourages a holistic, inter-connected and more strategic approach to managing environmental systems which, in turn, can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of interventions[14]. In practice, partnerships work in different ways and have varying degrees of success. The following section summarises the results from previous studies highlighting the factors that underpin successful partnership working and common barriers and challenges which partnerships face.

3.2 Success Factors for Partnership Working

In 2018, a study used self-evaluation data from around 100 catchment partnerships across England supported by focussed interviews with national experts and catchment practitioners to derive an evaluation tool for improving partnership working. It created an agreed list of success factors for partnership working as shown in 31. The nine success factors range from leadership style and relationship building, to long-term planning and basing partnership work on up-to-date data and evidence and are usefully grouped into to three aspects of partnership working: I) people and relationships, II) plans and processes, and III) tools, data, and methods.

Table 3-1 Success factors for partnership working developed for catchment partnerships

People and Relationships
1. Having a positive leadership style with the right capacity and skills
2. Having the right individuals from the right organisations actively and consistently supporting
3. Building trust and good respectful working relationships to create strong foundations
Plans and Processes
4. Having a long-term catchment plan to show the strategic importance of projects
5. Being agile to respond to (funding) opportunities as they arise
6. Sharing work amongst partners
7. Evaluating and responding to policy changes
Tools, data, and methods
8. Underpinning work with up-to-date data and evidence
9. Using national support and support from other partnerships and umbrella groups

Source: Baxter et al. (2018)[15] Note 1: Evaluation is considered as a theme running across the factors in the maturity model.

[12] Defra (2013) *Evaluation of the Catchment Based Approach Pilot Stage*, accessed 13 November 2023, https://randd.defra.gov.uk/

[13] Castán Broto, V., and Bulkeley, H. (2013) A survey of urban climate change experiments in 100 cities, *Global Environmental Change*, Vol.23, No.1, pp.92–102

[14] European Commission (2007) *Integrated Environmental Management: Guidance in relation to the Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment*

[15] Baxter, D., Rees, Y., and Chowdhury, T. (2018) *Framework for the monitoring and evaluation of catchment partnership working*

Further tools for partnership assessment have been produced for the flood sector by Middlesex Flood Hazard Research.[16] The "Self-assessment tool for Partnerships" uses three areas/criteria – legitimacy, internal partnership dynamics and cross-sectoral coordination and integration – to assess partnerships, using high, medium, and low as assessment scoring. Both tools are designed to help partnerships self-assess and build capacity by providing indicators of what good partnership working requires. In doing so, partnerships can identify their relative strengths and weaknesses, and areas for improvement.

Research into water governance in the North West River Basin District conducted between 2020 and 2021, identified a number of factors which led to successful partnership working including the involvement of a **diverse range of organisations** and their **willingness to work in partnership** and to develop good personal working relationships with transparency and professionalism.[17] 'Soft skills', such as **openness and honesty**, were noted to be critical for enabling strong relationships and a culture of cooperation.

The **range and diversity of stakeholders** in a partnership was also found to be an important factor for success in a 2019 review of the 25 Year Environment Plan (YEP) Local Delivery.[18] The review examined how collaboration and partnership working can contribute to achieving environmental objectives, using evidence mainly from case studies from across the UK. Purposefully building initial partnerships around **diverse skillsets** contributed to success by giving the partnerships access to a range of tools, but also giving each partner/member a greater sense of value in the partnership. The paper further notes that while strong personal relationships are key, high turnover in organisations, especially charities, NGOs, and local authorities, means over-dependence on a small number of individuals is a risk. Partnerships which can **draw on a wide network** and a larger pool of resources, especially cross-sectoral, can be better placed to overcome this risk.

This is particularly important in the case of leadership. The research found that while formal structures, incentives and requirements can bring stakeholders together in the early stages of a partnership, in reality, it is often **individuals with a vision and the ability to convene people** who hold a partnership together. Partnerships which have mechanisms to train and develop new leaders and to plan for succession, as well as 'ownership' by a diversity of stakeholders, are less vulnerable to turnover or changes in political forces.

Furthermore, the need for a **shared vision and shared objectives** was a recurring theme. For example, a 2015 assessment of the progress and achievements of Nature Improvement Areas found that shared visions and objectives improved communication, encouraged joined up working and more integrated implementation.[19] The study also noted that most NIAs could start quickly because they evolved from existing partnerships, which reduced the time and effort it took to establish new partnerships.

In the case of the North Devon Biosphere Partnership, **a robust evidence base** was identified as a key success factor in setting out a shared vision for their locality.[20] The North Devon Biosphere Partnership is a long-standing partnership whose purpose is to help the local authorities in Devon to fulfil their

[16] Environment Agency. (2021) Evaluating the effectiveness of flood and coastal erosion risk governance in England and Wales. Available at https://www.gov.uk/flood-and-coastal-erosion-risk-management-research-reports/understanding-effective-flood-and-coastal-erosion-risk-governance-in-england-and-wales

[17] Rees, Y., Duffield, L., and Richards, R. (2021) *Water Governance Study - Phase 2 Report v2.1.pdf*, accessed 14 November 2023, https://documentcloud.adobe.com/spodintegration/index.html?locale=en-us

[18] Orr, P., Morse-Jones, S., Aboud, N., et al. (2019) *25 Year Environment Plan Local Delivery: Enhancing Local Delivery and Implementation Through Strengthening Stakeholder Relationships, Integration, and Leadership. A report to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)*

[19] Collingwood Environmental Planning (2015) Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Final Report (2012-2015), accessed 14 November 2023, https://documentcloud.adobe.com/spodintegration/index.html?locale=en-us. Results were based feedback from over 120 people via survey or interview, including partner organisations, NIA partnership chairs and national stakeholders.

[20] Orr, P., Morse-Jones, S., Aboud, N., et al. (2019) *25 Year Environment Plan Local Delivery: Enhancing Local Delivery and Implementation Through Strengthening Stakeholder Relationships, Integration, and Leadership. A report to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)*, 2019

commitments to North Devon's Biosphere Reserve.[21] The partnership had robust evidence about the starting point of the natural capital of their land and built a shared vision by partnering with local universities to establish a methodology allowing the movement towards a natural capital approach. A combination of project work and continued dialogue with landowners was underpinned by this evidence base and resulted in a dynamic partnership which shares a common vision and makes integrated decisions.[22]

More successful local partnerships often engage a range of organisations but focus on clear, area-specific issues. The 2019 review of the 25 Year Environment Plan Local Delivery found that where partnerships focused on **place-based concerns or characteristics** - such as local air quality or coastal erosion - this can help mobilise people, drawing on their commitment to the area in which they live or work.

Not only having a shared vision and clear, place-based focus, but **relating the vision to wider strategic frameworks**, was also highlighted in the 25YEP review as contributing to successful partnership working. Local nature partnerships (LNPs) for instance were identified as being able to achieve significant environmental outcomes because of good collaboration and relating local issues to wider strategic frameworks. An example of this that came out of this research is the Northern Upland Chain LNP, as a partnership that is pushing for good environmental outcomes as part of wider objectives in the context of hill farming. In the face of challenges in gaining traction or funding for the issues faced by upland northern hill farmers, the LNP launched a pilot for a new agri-environmental scheme which was able to mobilise funding and raise awareness of the importance of high nature value hill farming. Other examples include the collaboration between Bedford LNP and other LNP's within the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge Growth Corridor and South East Midlands LEP to begin to develop evidence for a strategic natural capital plan.[23]

Linking local issues to a wider strategic framework in this way may be an effective approach for partnerships to achieve greater legitimacy or authority to take action. The same paper discusses the importance of legitimacy in gaining trust by demonstrating results, this can act as a constraint or an enabler in a partnerships' ability to facilitate action.[24] Partnerships should develop several forms of legitimacy at local and national levels in order to appeal to many audiences. This is important in achieving buy-in.

Lastly, a study by Defra reviewing partnership approaches for farming and environment policy delivery identified several key principles for successful partnership approaches. The most relevant of these are summarised in Table 3-2 below and grouped according to the stage of a partnership's development, from establishing, through delivery, to monitoring. The study noted that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to successful partnerships, but that a common 'checklist' of considerations emerged through the evidence review and discussions with stakeholders. In addition to factors which this literature review has already identified, the study notes that flexibility in delivery and using trusted delivery partners, particularly with local relevance, can contribute to success.

[21] North Devon Biosphere *North Devon Biosphere Partnership*, accessed 14 December 2023, https://www.northdevonbiosphere.org.uk/biosphere-partnership.html

[22] Orr, P., Morse-Jones, S., Aboud, N., et al. (2019) *25 Year Environment Plan Local Delivery: Enhancing Local Delivery and Implementation Through Strengthening Stakeholder Relationships, Integration, and Leadership. A report to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)*, 2019

[23] Orr, P., Morse-Jones, S., Aboud, N., et al. (2019) *25 Year Environment Plan Local Delivery: Enhancing Local Delivery and Implementation Through Strengthening Stakeholder Relationships, Integration, and Leadership. A report to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)*, 2019

[24] ibid

Table 3-2 Successful partnership approaches for farming and environment policy delivery identified by Defra 2013

Stage of development	Success factors
Establishing the partnership	1. A common driver/shared objective to bring partners together. Agreeing this early on will help target setting, convening partners and assigning responsibilities. Monitoring and evaluation should also be agreed in the early stages of the partnership. 2. Clarity on how the partnership fits within the wider policy landscape. 3. Trust, flexibility, and reciprocity. A willingness to take responsibility and a range of skillsets. 4. Inclusion of too many partners at the early stage could delay agreements. Partnerships can start small and grow.
Delivery	1. Clear and consistent messaging/branding for the initiative. 2. Flexibility to changing circumstances and tailoring to the local level. 3. Use of trusted organisations and existing channels, particularly those with local relevance, to deliver messages. 4. Understanding what motivates different people to participate in delivery.
Monitoring and evaluation	1. Consistent monitoring using a robust baseline to identify trends and help improve delivery. 2. Evaluation which involves all partners, and which is fully transparent.

Source: Defra (2013) [25]

3.3 Barriers and Challenges for Partnership Working

From across the literature, **inadequate, short-term, and delayed funding and resources** for partnership working emerged as a common challenge. This challenge was not just about the level of funding, but also around timescales (both as delays in granting funding and in short, single year funding periods) and the ability to accept funding for partnerships seeking to become self-sufficient and attract in further funding from a variety of sources.

Particular challenges arise if funding is delayed. This prevents staff from being recruited into key posts, exacerbating problems of small organisations trying to manage additional workload and administrative burdens in short timescales, particularly when setting up and maintaining a new partnership. Lack of secure funding, for example where funding is only provided annually, prevents small organisations from

[25] Defra (2013) Review of Partnership Approaches for Farming and the Environment Policy Delivery. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c31aa40f0b67d0b11f7b3/review-partnership-approaches-farming-environment-policy-delivery.pdf

being able to create permanent posts, increasing staff turnover, and admin burden and decreasing effectiveness. The review of NIAs found that even three-year funding period was insufficient to achieve many objectives and that a five-year funding period was more appropriate to support local coordination and management if partnerships are to function well. [26]

Continued delivery of objectives and relationships once the grant funding ended was also found to be a challenge, even when partnerships, such as the NIA, set out to develop a forward looking business plan. Thus, not only a lack of funding but also the brevity of funding cycles can present barriers to local partnerships and challenges to long-term resilience. Feedback from self-funding partnerships seeking to broker funding for nature-based solutions also noted points about how the organisation is set up, in that it must be able to receive funding from anticipated sources.

Another barrier to partnership working are the **different structures and processes between organisations** in a partnership. In the review of local delivery of the 25 YEP, it was found that differences between organisations, such as structures, procedures, funding, and budgetary arrangements, can make collaboration more difficult.[27] A similar finding was reported in a 2014 assessment of the opportunities for aligning planning and delivery of water and natural asset management where different cultures, legal and institutional structures created siloed mentalities and a lack of cohesion across the water system. Such variations can make coordination between different organisations more time consuming.

A related issue is around pre-existing relationships and reputations which can cause **cultural and political tensions** between stakeholders and partners. This was also highlighted in a paper exploring a case study of a Category V area in Northumberland National Park. Stakeholders from 19 different types of organisations involved with the management of the area were interviewed for this study.[28] The research highlighted that the reputations of organisations can dictate how partners or certain actors within a partnership are treated, particularly those from the public sector. It was found that convoluted institutional history has shaped the present-day approach to its management.

These **pre-conceived ideas of certain organisations or actors** within that organisation have potential to impact inter-personal relations between stakeholders in a negative way. This reflects advice from the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment about setting up a new and purpose-built partnership to properly focus on the issue in hand.[29] It also echoes findings from the Natural Course review of regional water governance in the North West which found that having a lead organisation with a single focus rather than being aligned specifically to the aims of a wider partnership can cause tension.[30] Competition between potential partners, particularly for funding, can also present a risk of fragmentation and friction between partners who may be seeking to deliver/achieve similar environmental goals. In the case of Natural Course in the North West River Basin, another key weakness identified was lack of clarity and overlapping responsibilities. The lack of clearly defined roles can make decision making in partnership working challenging and increases the risk of duplicating effort. [31]

In a parallel project commissioned by the EA, which delivered workshops on strategic funding plans, Eunomia asked partners of three of the Nature Returns partnerships to identify the benefits and

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[26] Collingwood Environmental Planning (2015) *Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Final Report (2012-2015)*, accessed 14 November 2023, https://documentcloud.adobe.com/spodintegration/index.html?locale=en-us

[27] Orr, P., Morse-Jones, S., Aboud, N., et al. (2019) *25 Year Environment Plan Local Delivery: Enhancing Local Delivery and Implementation Through Strengthening Stakeholder Relationships, Integration, and Leadership. A report to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)*, 2019

[28] Austin, R., Thompson, N., and Garrod, G. (2016) Understanding the factors underlying partnership working: A case study of Northumberland National Park, England, *Land Use Policy*, Vol.50, pp.115–124

[29] An Environment Fund for a Local Authority, Royal Agriculture University, Eunomia and 3Keel, unpublished, 2021. The study sought views from partnerships designed to raise private funding for the environment.

[30] Rees, Y., Duffield, L., and Richards, R. (2021) *Water Governance Study - Phase 2 Report v2.1.pdf*, accessed 14 November 2023, https://documentcloud.adobe.com/spodintegration/index.html?locale=en-us

[31] Rees, Y., Duffield, L., and Richards, R. (2021) *Water Governance Study - Phase 2 Report v2.1.pdf*, accessed 14 November 2023, https://documentcloud.adobe.com/spodintegration/index.html?locale=en-us

challenges of partnership working. The results are summarised in Table 3-3 and Table 3-4 and clearly show that partners recognise many benefits as well as challenges.

Table 3-3 The value added by collaborative working

Type of value	Key points
Efficiency	- Economies of scale and reducing duplication of work/effort. - Ability to provide collective outputs, and to share/pool responsibility. - Pooling resources (bigger budgets, bringing together multiple sources of funding). - Reduces transaction costs for buyers/investors. - Targeted engagement with stakeholders.
Multiple skillsets and knowledge sharing	- Each organisation brings different skillsets, strengths and (historic) knowledge. Helps to build a wider network. - Enables sharing of evaluation reports. - Sharing experiences.
Building trust	- Helps to build confidence for investors and buyers by reducing competition. - Individual organisational brands can increase trust/reliability. - Open, consensual discussions.
Alignment	- One voice and alignment on themes and cross-overs.
Attracting finance	- Can provide critical mass/scaled offering to attract investors. - Negotiating power to talk to buyers. - Coordinated funding.
Project delivery	- Connectivity and bringing together multiple issues. - Optimal land use and expanding nature recovery plans. - There are different features/areas of a landscape which offer different ecosystem services.

Table 3-4 Challenges of collaborative working

Type of challenge	Key points
Competition between partners	- Organisations are protective e.g., of relationships and data. - Issues around confidentiality and GDPR. - Choosing a lead partner and how they are recognised/get credit, and whose logo/brand is associated with the project. - Lack of unrestricted funds increases the risk of competition.
Engaging key stakeholders	- Gaining buy-in from local landowners/farmers.

Type of challenge	Key points
Lack of certainty	- The natural capital market is immature which makes it difficult for land-owners to commit to change. - Lack of certainty over what policy is emerging/coming in the future and no one accepted code for selling ecosystem services. This makes long-term decisions difficult.
Lack of expertise	- Specialist skillsets are in short supply. - Not clear where to access guidance for grant funding and finance. - Lack of leadership skills and lack of confidence to think big among the partners. - Lack of clarity around who the buyers are for ecosystem services.
Organisational differences	- Structural differences between partner organisations increases admin. - Board members of partner organisations are very risk adverse. - Restrictions around what charities can do with different types of finance/funding. - Distrust around repayable finance. - Different languages/ways of talking for example around flood risk. - Deliverability is linked to the organisational boundaries of partner organisations. This can cause challenges for partnership working.
Lack of alignment on environmental outcomes	- Lack of clarity on environmental problems to solve. - Lack of an integrated or coordinated (catchment scale) plan. - Insufficient money and time to create a joint plan. - Huge number of projects and interventions to promote at a quick pace which can cause confusion. - Short-term decision making.
Achieving scale	- Achieving scale and connection with locals. - Total potential funding is not enough to cover collaboration activities.

3.4 Summary

The success factors and challenges for partnership working identified in the literature review are summarised in Table 3-5, building from the self-evaluation framework developed by Baxter et al.[32] It shows that in addition to funding, many challenges for partnerships relate to how well partners understand and can accommodate the varying objectives, roles, and ways of working of others.

[32] Baxter, D., Rees, Y., and Chowdhury, T. (2018) *Framework for the monitoring and evaluation of catchment partnership working* Available at self-evaluation-tool-v2.pdf (catchmentbasedapproach.org)

Notably, the Northumberland National Park study helps illustrate the complexity of relationships within partnerships and how important it is to monitor these relationships.[33] Management bodies should understand where relationships between partners have broken down historically, even if this involves their own organisation, and try to work differently going forward. Although it is difficult to change perceptions of organisations it is important to acknowledge this barrier and find creative solutions to overcome it. Increasing the awareness of this issue may encourage actors to look critically at how their partnerships are working and the self-evaluation guide developed by Baxter et al for CaBA partnerships could be useful in this regard.[34]

The success factors and challenges identified in Table 3-5 were used to support the data gathering for this study, for example by prompting responses in interviews. The study therefore builds on, and can be contrasted with, previous research findings. Simple versions of the self-assessment criteria developed by Baxter et al were also used in interviews to help gauge current partnership maturity.

[33] Austin, R., Thompson, N., and Garrod, G. (2016) Understanding the factors underlying partnership working: A case study of Northumberland National Park, England, *Land Use Policy*, Vol.50, pp.115–124

[34] Baxter, D., Rees, Y., and Chowdhury, T. (2018) *Framework for the monitoring and evaluation of catchment partnership working*. Available at self-evaluation-tool-v2.pdf (catchmentbasedapproach.org)

Table 3-5 Summary of success factors and challenges for partnership working emerging from the literature review

Category	Success factors	Challenges
People and relationships	A leader with a positive leadership style and with the right capacity, technical and interpersonal skills. Commitment from the right people in the right organisations with diverse skillsets to work in a partnership. Minimising exposure to risk by spreading core knowledge across multiple individuals. Building trust by developing strong, open, respectful, and honest relationships.	1. Pre-existing or historical reputations of organisations can hinder partnership relationships and impact on inter-personal relations due to as a result of organisational reputations. 2. Cultural and political tensions between stakeholders and partners due to different organisational ways of working. 3. Differences between organisations, such as structures, procedures, funding, and budgetary arrangements etc. can make collaboration more difficult. 4. Unclear or overlapping roles and responsibilities of partners. 5. Translating benefits into individual motivators in order to increase commitment. 6. Being over ambitious e.g. expecting 100% adoption.
Power and ownership	1. Legitimacy established by clear support from existing local and national level institutions and development of a professional approach and track record. 2. Place-based/area specific focus to mobilise support and draw on the commitment to real issues faced by local people helps to build local buy-in. 3. Wide network and large pool of resources to mitigate risks of over-dependence on small pool of resource and expertise.	1. Inadequate resourcing available to support local coordination and management.

Category	Success factors	Challenges
Plans and Processes	1. Shared vision and ability to convene people while being able to relate this to a wider strategic framework. 2. Training and succession planning to ensure the long-term stability of the partnership. 3. Sharing work/resources in terms of time, money, and expertise between organisations to elevate the outcomes achieved by all partners. 4. Understand future income sources and their requirements and create a business plan for long-term income, including funding for managing the partnership. 5. Consider setting up a new body to focus specifically on fund-raising aligned to the partnership purpose that can receive funding from all sources identified as potential clients.	1. Insufficient flexibility in how deliverables can be met. 2. Managing the additional workload and administrative burden for partners. 3. Finding the additional time needed to facilitate coordination between different organisations.

4.0 Stakeholder Engagement Findings and Analysis

4.1 Overview

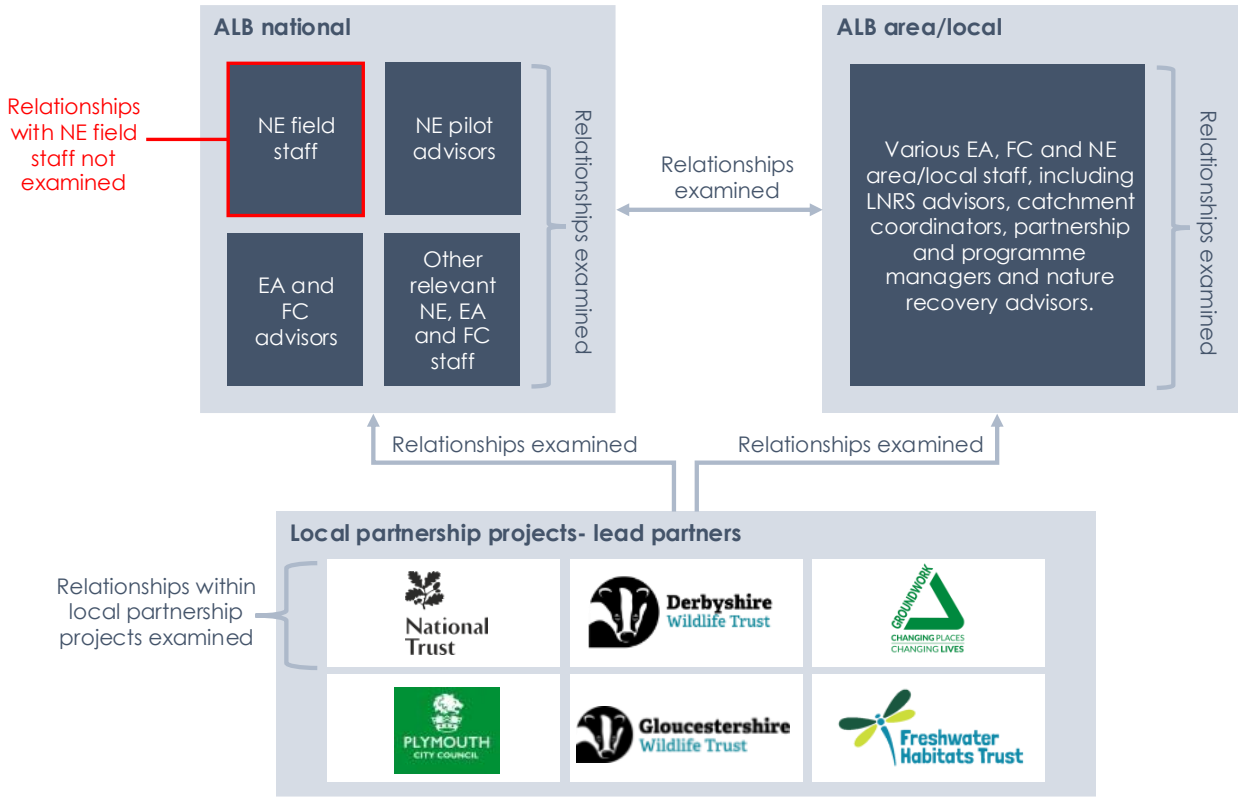
The following sections analyse the findings from stakeholder engagement to answer the research questions. The analysis examines many aspects of partnership working and working together, exploring the complexity of horizontal and vertical relationships within the Nature Returns programme. The findings explore relationships from three perspectives, listed below and illustrated in Figure 4-1:

1. National ALB perspective: where the lead partners, area ALB staff and national ALB staff provided views on working together with national ALB staff

2. Area ALB perspective: where the lead partners, area ALB staff and national ALB staff provided views on working with area ALB staff; and

3. The local partnership project perspective: where both lead partners and ALB interviewees considered the relationships within the local partnership projects.

Figure 4-1 Relationships and perspectives examined during the research



Each section draws upon perspectives from all of these levels to answer the research questions. The findings are organised as follows:

- Section 4.2: Interactions between the Nature Returns Local Partnership Projects and Defra ALBs;
- Section 4.3: Factors for Successful Partnership Working;
- Section 4.4: ALB Processes and Structures; and
- Section 4.5: Structures and Support for Establishing Nature Recovery Partnerships.

Overarching themes which emerge from this analysis are discussed further in section 5.0- Discussion and Recommendations.

4.2 Interactions between the Nature Returns Local Partnership Projects and Defra ALBs

This section answers the following research question: **how do the Nature Returns local partnership projects interact with Defra ALBs (locally based and national team staff) in a place and what are the challenges they face when doing so?**

4.2.1 How the Local Partnership Projects Interact with Defra ALBs

In interviews and focus groups, the local partnership project interviewees, and the ALB national, area and local interviewees described how they interacted with each other under the Nature Returns programme as well as beyond the programme in wider partnership working. The research focused on the formality, frequency, and purpose/content of these interactions. Table 4-1 presents the results.

Broadly, all six local partnership projects had contact with each of the ALBs, although this varied in extent. NE provided formal programme support to each partnership, while the Derwent Forest and Wansbeck projects had governance structures which included ALB representatives. All local partnership projects referred to site visits from ALBs as well as green finance support from the EA national team. Technical delivery support, knowledge sharing and support with applications were also common forms of interaction between ALBs and the local partnership projects.

Notably, although the local partnership project interviewees were asked separately about relationships with national and local ALB staff, we found that: a) the local partnership interviewees did not differentiate between relationships with national and local ALB representatives, and b) the local partnership interviewees and local/area ALB staff often worked together on several projects for many reasons which made it difficult to differentiate between specific roles and relationships relating to Nature Returns.

Table 4-1 Nature of Interactions between Nature Returns Local Partnership Projects and Defra ALBs Note, some cells are left blank

Local Partnership Project	Lead Partner	ALB	Nature of interaction with each ALB							
			Level of formality and regularity		Content / subject					
			Formal - regular board, steering group or Adviser involvement	Informal - ad-hoc check-ins, semi-regular	Nature Returns - Programme support and reporting	Nature Returns - application or scoping support	Site visits	General knowledge sharing	Green finance support/ information provision	Technical support with interventions
Derwent Living Forest Project	Derbyshire Wildlife Trust	NE	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes			Yes
		EA	Yes	Yes				Yes	Yes	
		FC	Yes	Yes			Yes		Yes	Yes
Ox-Bucks Freshwater Network	Freshwater Habitats Trust	NE	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes			
		EA		Yes					Yes	Yes
		FC		Yes			Yes			Yes
Plymouth Natural Grid	Plymouth City Council	NE	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes		
		EA		Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
		FC		Yes			Yes	Yes		Yes
Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery	Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust	NE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		
		EA		Yes					Yes	
		FC		Yes				Yes		Yes
Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change	Groundwork North East & Cumbria	NE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			Yes
		EA	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes		Yes	
		FC		Yes				Yes		Yes
Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration project	National Trust	NE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes
		EA		Yes			Yes		Yes	Yes
		FC		Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes

Level of Formality and Regularity

The findings show that all six local partnership projects interacted formally and regularly with national NE staff, specifically the Nature Returns advisors. These interactions typically occurred through fortnightly or monthly online meetings. One local partnership project (*LPP4*) for instance, reported communicating with the NE advisers four to five times per week and holding formal monthly meetings with the project manager. The NE local partnership project advisors also provided points of contact for other ALBs when reaching out to the six local partnership projects. Furthermore, all local partnership projects reported informal, ad hoc communication with the NE advisors and the NE field team.

Most local partnership projects reported having less regular and formalised contact with the EA and FC. These interactions were mainly ad hoc, i.e., when individuals were available, or when needed for specific technical processes, and thus varied with the type of interventions being delivered. For example, one local partnership project (*LPP1*) reported having multiple key contacts with local and area EA staff with whom they interact very regularly with email updates and questions. Flooding and natural flood management was a particular focus in that project location.

In contrast, two other local partnership projects described how the nature of their work meant that local EA staff had not been heavily involved, one responding: "*the Environment Agency has been more of a sleeping partner recently […] there hasn't been a great deal of interaction with the local team […] they have stepped back as they have not been needed at the moment, they are there if we need them.*" *(LPP5*). Similarly, engagement with local FC staff depended on the extent of woodland creation within each local partnership project. A national ALB member of staff felt that the FC had the right level of communication with the local partnership projects because there '*wasn't really enough woodland creation or woodland management happening within the projects' (N1)*. Indeed, a local partnership project interviewee felt that NE were doing '*the bulk of the work' (LPP2)* while FC and EA involvement was much more limited.

Two local partnership projects referred to formal governance structures for the project, the Derwent Forest, and the Wansbeck. In the case of the Derwent Forest project, there are two levels of governance within the project: a project board and an advisory group. Area and national ALB representatives from all three ALBs sit on one or both of these, with the project board meeting every four months. For the Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change project, there is a monthly steering group meeting which the Natural England advisor attends. On reflection, one national ALB interviewee noted that where partnerships did have an existing management structure (for the project), these provided an opportunity for regular contact. The interviewee felt that where this had not been the case, contact had been more ad hoc and 'semi-regular'.

Content/Subject of Interactions

The local partnership projects engaged with Defra ALBs for six key reasons, as summarised in Table 4-1. These ranged from support with bidding and scoping at the application stage of Nature Returns, to specific technical support with project delivery.

Site visits and technical support with delivery were the most common forms of engagement reported by the local partnership projects. Often, there was a connection between the two, i.e., site visits by ALB staff as part of providing technical support. Alternatively, site visits were noted by ALB staff as opportunities for scientific learning or data gathering or due to personal/professional interest. The following types of site visits and technical support were reported by ALB staff and the local partnership projects:

- Surveys and field work from NE field staff;
- Site visits from the EA to see natural flood management work;

- Survey work and site visit by local/area FC;
- Site visits by area FC staff with NE carbon scientists;
- An in person meet and greet at the start of the project;
- Specialist advice provided from national NE staff around heathland and grassland;
- Specialist advice sought by a local partnership project from local and area EA staff around fisheries, biodiversity, geomorphology;
- Responding to queries from local FC staff regarding tree protection used on intervention sites;
- Technical advice provided by a local FC officer around a felling license and the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process;
- Engagement with local forest managers from Forestry England around peat restoration;
- Engagement with the FC around tree planting and woodland management;
- Engagement with EA as a regulator on sites- assigning flood risk and activity permits; and
- Engagement (consultation, consent, advice, sharing best practice) with NE around delivering habitat creation on the edge of a protected site e.g., SSSI.

The above list illustrates how the local partnership projects and Defra ALBs are interacting in a place to deliver nature recovery interventions. Apart from the site visits and survey work conducted by the NE field teams, other types of technical interaction varied according to the type of project intervention.

In comparison, all local partnership projects referred to interacting with national EA staff around green finance, although the extent of these interactions varied. Notably, three of the six local partnership projects reported greater engagement with the EA on green finance through a separate programme being delivered through the EA's Future Funding team. One local partnership project felt that this engagement had enabled lots of knowledge sharing and learning opportunities around green finance. The same interviewee also noted that the FC had provided support around woodland carbon code markets.

Knowledge and opportunity sharing by the ALBs was referred to in a more general context by a number of the local partnership projects, for instance;

> 'The woodland officer is so engaged, constantly drives things forward, he's a joy to work with and always sharing opportunities, asking if we want help with woodland creation opportunities.' (local partnership project, LPP1)

> 'Knowledge sharing [is working well], we had really great feedback from the FC on some of the wood pasture work we've been doing. Field work sharing, Mel [NE] and her team have been receptive to our rangers joining them and some of the surveys they were doing when they were looking at carbon storage and sequestration." (Local partnership project, LPP3)

The responses illustrate where the interviewees found knowledge sharing and engagement between local FC and NE staff beneficial, including support identifying woodland creation opportunities, feedback on habitat interventions and joining field work and surveys.

More specifically, two local partnership projects referred to knowledge sharing and engagement with the ALBs through Nature Returns forums. The interviewees felt that these forums on data and monitoring and green finance had been beneficial.

Lastly, four local partnership projects reported interacting with the ALBs at the application and scoping stage of the project. One local partnership project interviewee described two area staff from the EA and NE as '*the initial driving force' (LPP5)* and that their ideas and discussions helped shape the project and the partnership. The same interviewee also felt that the EA and NE were good at inspiring, encouraging, and driving forward the project throughout its duration.

In summary, the findings illustrate that the six local partnership projects and Defra ALBs are interacting both formally and informally in a place for several key reasons. While interactions with NE were more common in form and frequency across the local partnership projects, interactions with the EA and FC varied in content and frequency. Greater consistency and formality of contact with national NE staff and NE field teams reflects NE's role as the programme manager.

Interactions between local partnership projects and the EA and FC were more ad hoc and typically varied by the type of project intervention and specific technical needs, or whether the project partnership had an existing governance structure which could accommodate ALB representatives. There was some more formal engagement around green finance with the EA at a national level within the programme, although the extent and frequency of this interaction varied between local partnership projects. Interactions that were based on knowledge sharing often had a two-way relationship, with both local partnership projects and Defra ALB staff benefitting from information provision and learning opportunities. While a number of these interactions were felt to be positive (see section 3.2 'Success Factors for Partnership Working' for more detail), ALB staff and local partnership projects also experienced challenges when engaging with each other.

4.2.2 Challenges with Interactions between Local Partnership Projects and Defra ALBs

The local partnership projects reported two main challenges when interacting with ALB staff:

1. Low or limited engagement with ALBs; and

2. Delays or technical issues with the Nature Returns funding programme.

These are explored further below.

Low or Limited Engagement with ALBs

Two local partnership project interviewees reported that ALB staff turnover and capacity restraints presented challenges under the Nature Returns Programme. For example, on the topic of EA and FC local staff, one local partnership project reported that;

> "[they were] brilliant in the end, but unfortunately there has been a high level of churn of officers at the FC which caused quite a few delays for us. Eventually we got Alex Underwood (who was overworked as he was covering someone else's patch as well), which was a game changer – he managed to expedite things and get things moving – got the right people in the room essentially" (local partnership project, LPP6)

ALB staff churn appeared to cause delays and hinder relationship building for at least one local partnership project. Forestry Commission local/area staff in particular were highlighted as being responsible for large geographic areas as well as having high staff turnover. A second local partnership project reported that the FC had only recruited their local advisor a couple of months before the time of interview and thus that level of support had not been in place until recently. The same interviewee

also noted that it had been difficult for their local EA catchment coordinator to support the project due to working part-time and having a high workload.

Another challenge, reported by one local partnership project, was the lack of decision-making ability of the NE Advisor;

> 'With [NE advisor] I have a fortnightly/monthly catch-up meetings, not super useful because often they can't make decisions. It takes few weeks to make a decision which isn't very helpful when we're trying to do things quickly. We've had a couple of sites drop out which has created spare budget, having to move money around so that we can still deliver. They [NE] have not been very dynamic about that.' (local partnership project, LPP2)

The response illustrates that limited decision making ability can cause project delays and impact local partnership agility, a challenge which is especially significant in a short funding and delivery programme. The challenges created by short funding cycles, reported by both ALB staff and local partnership projects, are discussed further in section 4.4.2.

Lastly, two local partnership interviewee reported specific challenges when engaging with the FC and EA. With regards to the FC, one local partnership project experienced issues around an England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO) application. The interviewee explained that the process took nine months and that there were communication issues because the FC only contacted the applicant with updates and not the two other project management and delivery partners. The interviewee felt that the delayed approval compromised their work, noting that they were only able to go ahead with delivery because the woodland creation was so small (only three hectares). If it had been bigger, they would have struggled to find stock and contractors etc. within such tight timescales.

Regarding the EA, another local partnership project reported the following regarding green finance support;

> '[…] we're supposed to have a green finance output from this project, but they haven't given us any steer, and it's difficult because we already have a lot going on with green finance and stuff that's bringing in actual money as well as plans, so it hasn't come to anything. They haven't been very specific about what they're expecting from us and we're nearly at the end of the project now, so we're not going to realistically come up with very much, or anything, in the green finance area.' (local partnership project, LPP2)

While the interviewee noted that they had 'a couple' of meetings about green finance with the EA national team, the interviewee did not feel they had received sufficient steer on expected outputs around green finance. As the project is coming to a close, the interviewee felt that meeting any green finance expectations is increasingly unrealistic. Similarly, from an ALB perspective, two national interviewees felt that the green finance work stream had neither been fully integrated into the programme reporting process, nor proactively asked for contributions through the local partnership advisors. Ultimately, one of the interviewees felt that strategic work around blended funding required different types of organisations (broader catchment partnerships) to the delivery-oriented organisations needed by NE to carry out habitat restoration.

Delays or Technical Issues with the Nature Returns Programme

Funding and contract delays at the start of the programme were reported as challenges by two local partnership projects. One interviewee noted that this created uncertainty and could have negatively impacted their relationship with their key delivery partner if they had not been able to meet the spending requirements (i.e., having to spend money in less than one quarter due to delays). A second local partnership project felt that the delays to the programme created additional pressure. The

interviewee recognised that this pressure would have been even greater if they had needed to recruit a whole new team for the project.

In addition, three local partnership projects referred to specific challenges with the reporting and contract systems/processes. One interviewee described how a mistake with sending out an altered funding/timescale contract meant that a significant proportion of money was lost to the project because it was not spent within a certain timeline. The interviewee reflected that;

> 'That goes to show that pace of change. It was a new type of contract, a lot of stuff was new to us and Defra and NE, it is inevitable that mistakes were made.' (local partnership project, LPP6)

A second interviewee noted how the NE reporting system under the programme changed, and that at the beginning, *'it didn't seem like they were quite ready […] I wouldn't say it didn't work, it just wasn't that polished' (LPP3)*. The interviewee reflected they had similar experience with reporting portals under other funding programmes.

Lastly, a third local partnership interviewee referred to NE bureaucracy as a challenge;

> 'Our first claim took forever to get through, partly our own fault, quite a lot of bureaucracy on their side which makes it difficult to be agile with decision making.' (local partnership project, LPP2)

While the interviewee recognises their role in this issue, they describe how bureaucracy impacted the local partnership's ability to be agile with decision making. Again, this was felt to be particularly challenging given the short timescales of the project.

In summary, two key types of challenge were reported by the local partnership projects, namely low or limited engagement with ALBs and specific issues with the programme structures/processes. Although these two themes emerged, different challenges were raised by different partnerships and not necessarily experienced consistently by all projects. This is likely due to differing skill sets, ALB connections/relationships and objectives within the project teams, demonstrating how place can influence local partnership working in different ways (as discussed in section 5.1.2- Influence of place on partnership working). The findings show that while valuable interactions occurred, there is room to improve joint working between local partnerships and ALBs for nature recovery.

4.3 Successful Partnership Working

This section addresses the following research question: **what are the factors that enable the successful establishment of nature recovery focused partnerships, using the six pilot projects as examples?** The section also presents a self-assessment of partnership working conducted by interviewees from the lead partners of each local partnership project.

4.3.1 Factors of Successful Partnership Working

All interviewees were asked to consider what worked well about relationships and partnership working under the Nature Returns programme as well as factors for successful partnerships more generally. The findings therefore present experiences of partnership working within Nature Returns and experiences of partnerships more broadly. Five key themes emerged from stakeholder engagement:

1. Having a shared vision;
2. Strong working relationships and the value of existing relationships;
3. A broad spectrum of the 'right' partners/stakeholders involved;
4. Creating a collaborative approach; and
5. Effective and regular communication.

These are explored in turn below.

Having a Shared Vision

Nine ALB interviewees noted that a clear and shared vision is important for successful partnership working. In the case of Nature Returns, three ALB interviewees reported that the Derwent Forest project has a particularly clear vison and purpose. The interviewees felt that this has helped the project team to strategize and work with external partners more effectively. One area ALB interviewee for instance, noted that the vision for the Derwent project is clear and ambitious and is *'exciting for people to get on board with' (FG1)*.

A shared vision and buy-in was also highlighted by four local partnership projects. One interviewee noted that *'buy-in'* from the key partners on the programme's vision is *'amazing' (LPP1),* while a second local partnership project reported that the key partners *are 'switched on to nature recovery' (LPP2)* meaning they are happy for the lead partner to deliver interventions on their land. The interviewee felt that this sped up the decision-making process, as the partners understand the project's perspective. As a result, communicating new ideas was felt to be easier, which in turn made delivery more efficient.

The need for a shared vision was echoed by national ALB interviewees when speaking more generally about their experience of successful partnership working. One national ALB interviewee stated that *'you need a common direction of travel' (N4)* from which opportunities for working with others can be identified. Another national ALB interviewee stated that the most successful partnerships, are those in which the partners fully understand each other's perspectives at the very outset and which *'make a real conscious effort' (N2)* to get everything clarified at the beginning. The same interviewee felt that the LNRS programme was a good practice example, describing how LNRS teams across the three ALBs have spent time discussing ways of working and addressing tensions. As a result, the interviewee felt that LNRS teams had more of a shared ambition, aspiration, and shared objectives. This way of working was echoed by an area ALB interviewee who thought that for collaborative working, very clear objectives are needed, which all partners are committed to from the start.

Exmoor National Park's Nature Recovery Vision was also referred to by two interviewees (ALB area and local partnership project) as a good practice example of creating a shared vision and the benefits this can have for partnership working;

> 'On Exmoor…the Nature Conservation Advisory Group sits within the National Park authority's governance structure. There is a… clear vision. The partners were commissioned by the wider Park Authority to come up with a nature recovery vision…and artists did a few iterations of what a nature rich Exmoor could look like in the future. There's also an action plan which sits within that. The vision has helped to provide an umbrella. It's also stimulated new projects.' (ALB area, FG3)

The vision sets out how farmers, land managers, conservation groups, public bodies and communities can work together to deliver a 'nature-rich' national park by 2050.[35] It was created by the 25 members of the Nature Conservation Advisory Group, which includes representatives from the National Trust, EA, RSPB and wildlife trusts.[36] [37] Interestingly, both interviewees emphasised how illustrations, which depict a current 'nature in decline' Exmoor landscape versus a future, nature rich landscape, are a key part of the vision. These responses suggest that visualisations are a particularly powerful tool for bringing different stakeholders together around shared aims.

Stakeholder engagement has shown that having a clear and shared vision can help partnerships strategize and work with external partners more effectively. Taking time at the start of any partnership project to identify and clarify this vision, as well as to fully understand each partner's perspectives is crucial. These findings align with the literature review, which found that shared objectives and visioning improved communication, encouraged joined up working and more integrated implementation.

Strong Working Relationships and the Value of Existing Relationships

Both local partnership project and ALB interviewees highlighted that relationship building is an important and necessary step to successful working relationships. One local partnership project interviewee noted that the commitment from ALB staff at the beginning of the project was particularly helpful for building relationships under the Nature Returns Programme;

> 'What was really good was the level of time and commitment at the beginning from NE to establish relationships. You knew who you were talking to and who you had to go to and speak to get some answers' (local partnership project, LPP6)

A second local partnership project interviewee stated that building positive relationships and having open conversations is important for problem solving and allowing differences between organisations within a partnership to be overcome. The interviewee felt that the ability to build positive relationships was linked to funding, highlighting the need for longer projects which incorporate (and fund) time to build positive relationships between partners. Similarly, a national ALB interviewee emphasised how positive and efficient partnerships can take months or even years to develop and that recognising this fact is important.

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[35] Exmoor National Park Authority (2014). Draft: 'Achieving a Nature-rich National Park', the Vision for Nature Recovery on Exmoor. Available at https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/3540d559/files/uploaded/Exmoor%20Nature%20Recovery%20vision%20October%202020%20DRAFT%20FOR%20CONSULTATION.docx

[36] Exmoor National Park Authority (2024) Our Vision for Nature Recovery. Available at https://www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk/nature-and-landscape/nature-recovery/our-vision-for-nature-recovery

[37] Bird Guides (2020) New vision launched to restore nature to Exmoor. Available at https://www.birdguides.com/news/new-vision-launched-to-restore-nature-to-exmoor/

In addition, two interviewees noted that staff consistency is important for successful relationship building. One local partnership project interviewee reported that having a consistent individual from NE (a Nature Returns Advisor) driving the project forwards was a *'revelation'* and meant they were able to have *'proper conversations and build relationships' (LPP1)*. This was echoed by a national ALB interviewee who stated that having staff consistency is key to *'developing good ways of working' (N4)*.

Strong existing relationships and partnerships were identified by both local partnership projects and ALB interviewees as a further success factor. As one local partnership project interviewee explained, if they had not invested time into building relationships with landowners before the project, they would not have been able to deliver the work or win the bid. These existing relationships allowed the project to start quickly because much of the planning was already well progressed. This was echoed by a national ALB interviewee who felt that because the lead partner was involved in multiple other partnerships and networks, such as farm clusters, this allowed a relatively small delivery body to carry out habitat creation at a larger scale.

Two other local partnership project interviewees, who both highlighted that having prior good working relationships and mutual trust is important. In one instance, an interviewee emphasised that due to their existing partnership with the National Trust (prior to the Nature Returns project), they already knew each other, were familiar with how they each operate and know how to best communicate with each other. The interviewee stated that without that existing relationship, starting the delivery, and meeting milestones and timelines for the project would have been very difficult.

Strong working relationships and the value of existing relationships have emerged as key factors which help create trust and high quality, efficient delivery. This point was identified in the literature review which found that utilising existing relationships reduced the time and effort needed to establish a partnership. Interviewees also noted that consistency amongst partners, in particular ALB staff, was beneficial and that this could be fostered through longer projects which enable time and funding for relationship building.

A Broad Spectrum of the 'Right' Partners

Six interviewees reported that having the right people and a broad spectrum of stakeholders involved in a partnership were important for success. A national ALB interviewee for instance, felt that the Nature Returns local partnership projects which were delivering most strategically (i.e., at landscape scale), were the ones who are *'engaging with a broad spectrum of other players in their catchment or landscape' (ALB national, N3)*.

Reflecting on partnership working more broadly, one area ALB interviewee explained how the Ock catchment partnership gained more focus and direction in recent years because of the involvement of local stakeholders, community groups and volunteers. The interviewee felt that involving the local farmer cluster for instance, has brought landowner support, and helped with funding bids. As an example of good practice, the interviewee describes how the catchment partnership conducted stakeholder analysis to identify which groups the partnership was lacking. Funders, decision makers, local groups and landowners emerged as four key types of stakeholders which could improve the partnership.

Overall, having a broad spectrum of the 'right' partners ensures that a project is engaging with partners who are able to make decisions, such as landowners, as well as stakeholders whose buy-in and support is beneficial, such as community groups and volunteers. This finding is supported by the literature review, which found that purposefully building partnerships around diverse skillsets contributed to success by giving the partnerships access to a range of tools.

Creating a Collaborative Approach

An overarching theme which ALB and local partnership project interviewees commented on was the importance of trust, respect, and openness. Two national ALB interviewees highlighted that an open-

dialogue with partners gives each partner the confidence to talk openly and honestly – they feel this is the case at the Nature Returns steering group meetings. In order for the partnerships to function with openness and honesty, one national ALB interviewee highlighted the importance of good interpersonal relationships between ALB staff;

> 'Relationships […] rely on having a good functioning open collaborative approach. We recognise that we're all trying to move in the same direction. We've had a lot of open conversations, and we value and respect each other's viewpoints which means that it's easier to listen to somebody when you respect them.' (ALB national, N4)

In addition, two ALB and four local partnership project interviewees reported that positive and can-do personalities can help to build successful partnerships. One local partnership project interviewee for instance, stated that a *'can-do'* attitude is *'really useful' (LPP6)*, especially when the project has run into barriers, such as a lack of alignment between the ALBs. A second local partnership project interviewee felt that the NE area and local staff had been *'flexible…keen to push things forward'* and *'incredibly positive'* given what had to be delivered in a short timeframe *(LPP4)*. The interviewee felt that such attitudes/personalities had helped the project to progress. This was echoed in the literature review, which highlighted how willingness to work in partnership and to develop good personal working relationships with transparency and professionalism was a factor of successful partnership working.

Effective and Regular Communication

Site visits were reported to be a particularly useful method of communication, as highlighted by seven interviewees from local partnership projects and ALB staff;

> 'In the southwest, Sarah did great job of ensuring in person, face-to-face site visits for all the ALBs involved early on. That was logistically more difficult in other areas. But it made a difference. People got to visit the sites and meet other ALBs. Where it didn't happen, it was a bit more staggered, and maybe we weren't in all of the meetings that we should have been. We had to kind of force our way in because if there was less understanding of the value input that we could bring at particular points.' (ALB national, N1)

This response suggests that where in-person meetings happened at the early stages of the programme, this helped the partners better understand their roles and the value they could bring to the project. Moreover, when asked for good practices which should be adopted to benefit both ALBs and local partnerships, a second national ALB interviewee replied *'as many face-to-face meetings and site visits as possible' (N1)*.

Notably, one local ALB interviewee felt that in person meetings worked particularly well for landowners. The interviewee described how face-to-face meetings were like social events and were helpful to *'bounce ideas off each other' (FG2)*. Similarly, an area ALB interviewee stated that *'understanding people is critical to collaborative working'* and that face-to-face meetings enabled this to happen more effectively.

Finally, four area and local ALB interviewees highlighted that regular communication is key to establishing and maintaining a successful partnership. One local ALB interviewee felt that *'having regular contact, even if you're not able to do it in person is still a really important thing to have.' (FG1)*. It was highlighted by interviewees that regular communication allows partners to check progress against aims, build relationships and offer support and feedback where needed.

Engagement between local partnership projects and ALB staff was noted by some interviewees to be bespoke, reflecting how different partners are likely to have different communication needs. While this is the case, the responses also illustrate that both the form and the regularity of communication

between partners are important factors for partnership working. Early in-person engagement, followed by regular virtual communication, are two good practices which have emerged from the findings.

In summary, five key success factors have emerged from stakeholder engagement. Having a shared vision, strong working relationships and recognising/building on the value of existing relationships were highlighted by interviewees as important for successful partnership working. Having not only a broad spectrum of partners, but the 'right' stakeholders involved, can further ensure that partnerships have direction and buy-in. Soft skills, such as openness, honesty and positive attitudes can help build relationships, social capital, and foster collaboration, while effective communication throughout a project is essential for successful partnerships. Many of these findings are supported by the literature review and shed light on several good practices which could be replicated in future partnerships for nature recovery.

4.3.2 Local Partnership Project Self-Assessment

During interviews, the lead partners of the six local partnership projects were asked to reflect on how they were performing as a partnership, including their relationships with delivery partners e.g., landowners, the ALBs and any other relevant local organisations. The interviewees were shown nine measures of successful partnership working, as defined by Baxter et al (2018)[38], and rated their performance against each category on a scale from low to high. The results are summarised in Table 4-2

Although the results are a self-assessment and express the views of only one or two members of the partnership, typically from the lead partner organisation, they provide an indication of how well the lead partners felt they were performing against different elements of effective partnership working.

[38] Baxter, D., Rees, Y., and Chowdhury, T. (2018) *Framework for the monitoring and evaluation of catchment partnership working*

Table 4-2 Nature Returns local partnership project self-assessment table

How would you rate these aspects of positive partnership working for your Nature Returns partnership project currently?

People and Relationship

	Derwent Living Forest Project	Ox-Bucks Freshwater Network	Plymouth Natural Grid	Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery	Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change	Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration Project
1. Have a positive leadership style with the right capacity and skills	Medium	High	High	Medium	High	High
2. Have the right individuals from the right organisations actively and consistently supporting	Low/ Medium	High	High	Medium	Medium/ High	Medium
3. Build trust and good respectful working relationships to create strong foundations	High	High	High	Medium	High	High

Plans and Processes

	Derwent Living Forest Project	Ox-Bucks Freshwater Network	Plymouth Natural Grid	Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery	Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change	Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration Project
4. Have a long-term plan to show the strategic importance of projects	High	Medium	Medium	Low	Low/ Medium	High
5. Are agile to respond to (funding) opportunities as they arise	Medium	High	High	High	High	High

	Derwent Living Forest Project	Ox-Bucks Freshwater Network	Plymouth Natural Grid	Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery	Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change	Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration Project
6. Share work amongst partners	Low	Low	Low/ Medium	Medium	Low	Medium
7. Evaluate themselves and respond to policy changes	Medium/ High	High	High	Low	Low/ Medium	Low/ Medium

Tools, Data and Methods

	Derwent Living Forest Project	Ox-Bucks Freshwater Network	Plymouth Natural Grid	Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery	Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change	Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration Project
8. Underpin work with up-to-date data and evidence	Medium	Medium	High	Low	High	High
9. Use local and national support and support from other partnerships and umbrella groups	Low	Low	Local – Medium/ High; National - Low	Low/ Medium	High	Medium/ High

Success Factors Commonly Rated as 'High'

The two success factors against which most interviewees felt they were already working at a 'high' level were: **being agile to respond to (funding) opportunities as they arise** and **building trust and good respectful working relationships to create strong foundations.** In both cases, five out of six interviewees rated their performance as 'high'. One interviewee commented:

> 'We all work really well together, no tensions or disputes - very good fruitful working relationship with all the partners. Partly due to the ethos of those organisations - their objectives are aligned, and they've signed up to this type of work and they put people in those positions because they've committed to this type of work.' (local partnership project, LPP5)

Having a positive leadership style with the right capacity and skills was also considered 'high' in four local partnership projects, while two interviewees rated their partnership as 'medium'.

Success Factors with Mixed Responses

Responses were more mixed with regards to the following four success factors:

1. Having the right individuals from the right organisations actively and consistently supporting;

2. Underpinning work with up-to-date data and evidence;

3. Evaluating and responding to policy changes; and

4. Having a long-term plan to show the strategic importance of projects.

For instance, 'having the right individuals from the right organisations actively and consistently supporting', was rated 'medium-high' by five of the six interviewees. One interviewee who responded 'low/medium' explained that:

> 'We've got the right organisations but possibly at the wrong levels. We've got the project board that functions well and the advisory group that functions well, but there's probably a middle thing between those two- local NE people, county council, organisations with statutory responsibilities- aren't as engaged as they could be. If we could get everybody on board to that vision, that would be brilliant.' (local partnership project, LPP1)

Only half of the interviewees meanwhile, rated their ability to underpin work with up-to-date data and evidence as 'high'. These interviewees explained how they are working towards establishing baseline data through survey work, bringing in bird surveyors and utilising ecologists for instance. One interviewee reported that the partnership had *'invested significantly in the baseline data for the project' (LPP6)*, spending at least 15% of the funding on this task. The one interviewee who rated this point 'low' highlighted how it is difficult to pull together a full baseline data set within a year. Other comments from partnerships which rated this point 'medium' centred on the lack of funding to conduct such data and evidence gathering, stating '*nobody pays for that*' *(LPP2)* and *'the funding available currently doesn't leave a lot of space for monitoring and data collection' (LPP1)*.

In response to evaluating themselves and responding to policy changes, half of the interviewees felt they were performing 'high'. One of these interviewees commented:

> 'When we have our advisory meetings and board meetings people are very good at sharing any updates and also upcoming updates that haven't happened yet and

> because we have such a breadth of organisations, there's rarely anything missed' (local partnership project, LPP1)

Having a long-term plan to show the strategic importance of the project also received varied responses- with two local partnership projects felt to be 'high' and the others a range of 'low' to 'medium'. One interviewee who felt the partnership was performing high in this area noted that:

> 'This type of project delivery should be much more strategic i.e. what is the big vision for the park and therefore how does this project fit within that strategic vision.' (local partnership project, LPP6)

An interviewee who responded 'low/medium' felt this was difficult to answer without knowing what 'long-term' means in the context of the project, as they are yet to secure funding past March 2024. Another interviewee highlighted that their strategy and vision for the project is more an ambition and that current funding cycles made long-term thinking difficult;

> 'Everyone is thinking two years down the line, and you should be thinking what is the 50-year plan for this area and green space – that is the reality of funding. It is not that we don't want to, but we don't have financial freedom to do that.' (local partnership project, LPP3)

Success Factors Commonly Rated as 'Low'

The two success factors against which most interviewees felt they were working at a 'low' level were: **using local and national support and support from other partnerships and umbrella groups**, and **sharing work amongst partners**.

With regards to drawing on support, one interviewee stated that they *'haven't really had the capacity' (LPP1)* to utilise the support. When reflecting on how they share work among partners, three interviewees rated their performance as 'low', but not necessarily as a negative. One interviewee for example commented that '*that's just the way it is, we've been engaged to do the work and we wouldn't expect other partners to be doing it'(LPP5)*. Two interviewees who rated this point 'medium' commented that they could be doing more/better in this area.

Moreover, national ALBs interviewees were asked which partnerships they thought were doing well. This led to an interesting conversation around whether it was the partnership or the project that was doing well. Some interviewees noted projects that were doing well, in terms of delivery, but seemingly with little partner involvement compared to others working more as a partnership. Some ALB interviewees referred to local partnership projects which were functioning more independently in practice than anticipated. For example, a national ALB interviewee suggested that a local FC staff member had found it easier to 'get into' one of the projects (Plymouth Natural Grid) compared to another (Wild Exmoor), explaining that:

> "Sometimes things are set up as a partnership, but actually there's one person in the group that's clearly running it and not seeing it as a partnership." (ALB national, N2)

Similarly, a second national ALB interviewee felt that partners that owned their own land struggled to develop the partnership beyond their own boundaries. Short timelines exacerbated this issue, as some local partnership projects felt they had to rush delivery over building relationships and having a shared vision.

In summary, interviewees responded most positively to the category 'Relationships and People', with the majority of local partnership projects rating these performance indicators as high or medium. No interviewee felt performance was low in this area. A greater range of performance was given for 'Plans and Processes', with agility generally considered high, but sharing work reported to be low or medium. The majority (4/6) interviewees felt they were performing medium or low against having a long-term plan. 'Tools, data, and methods' also had a range of responses. Interviewees echoed issues around funding and timescales, highlighting how this can limit the amount of monitoring/baseline data collection and engaging support that can take place.

In terms of overall operating levels, all partnerships felt they were operating at a low level against at least one of the success factors. The partnerships which felt they were operating at a high level against the majority of factors (5-7) and at a low level for few (1-3) were: Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration Project, Plymouth National Grid, Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change, and Ox-Bucks Freshwater Network. In contrast, Derwent Forest Project and Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery assessed themselves as operating at a high level against fewer factors (1-3) and at a low level against more factors (3-4).

While the findings are a self-assessment and thus subjective, the data does indicate where the Nature Returns partnerships felt they had particular strengths and weaknesses/gaps. Moreover, even if a partnership is not operating at an optimal level, this does not necessarily mean the project delivery and interventions are not succeeding (a point which is discussed further in section **Error! Reference source not found.**- Effective Partnership Working).

4.4 ALB Processes and Structures

This section explores how, in the context of the Nature Returns partnerships, processes and structures within Natural England, the Environment Agency and the Forestry Commission have worked together to support nature recovery in a place and where they have presented barriers. Five research questions are examined in the following sections.

4.4.1 ALB Processes and Structures which work Together to Support Nature Recovery in a Place

This section explores the following research questions: **I) How do processes and structures within the three ALBs work together to provide support for nature recovery in a place? II) Are there processes for resolving disagreements between ALBs and ways to support each other's priorities?** The majority of these findings are from local and national ALB perspectives. Four key themes emerged and are discussed below, with the relevant level indicated in the heading.

Local: Interpersonal Relationships

Positive officer relationships between the three ALBs at local/area level was a factor raised by many as supporting nature recovery together in a place. One national ALB interviewee emphasised the willingness from local officers, compared to national staff, to engage and to work together, while an area team member described how the Natural England Tree Action Plan Delivery (TAP-D) officers and Forestry Commission ecologists for instance, are working well together at specific sites. Indeed, a second national ALB interviewee emphasised that the local area staff and how they work in partnership is critical across the board;

> 'They're the ones on the ground, the foot soldiers that do that on a day-to-day basis. Their relationships with whoever it is, are absolutely critical. Lose that and you lose the partnerships.'(ALB national, N5)

These relationships were considered by three ALB staff to be particularly strong in priority or protected habitats;

> 'I think Natural England develops particularly strong relationships with the EA where there are protected sites such as rivers, like the Northumberland Coast and Lindisfarne. Where there's a direct interface, that officer level on work areas, then we have very close relationships on that aspect.' (ALB area, FG4)

It appears that priority or protected habitats can foster stronger relationships between ALBs at a local level. Another national ALB interviewee described priority habitats as 'giving them a route' into making connections with local and area teams which was felt to be beneficial.

Area/regional: Coordinating Mechanisms

A specific co-ordination structure enabling cross-ALB working in the context of Wessex was referred to by two ALB interviewees. The Wessex Integrated Strategic Planning board (WISP) was seen to be a successful model for bringing representatives from Natural England and the Environment Agency together to ensure local and national priorities are aligned in a place. Although WISP was set up initially by the EA to join up internal priorities and action plans, Natural England has two representatives on the board. As one interviewee noted;

> 'If we could build on that success, if we could have a WISP that included the Forestry Commission as well, that would be great. I think that's very successful, and a sign of the way things could go in the future.' (ALB area, FG3)

Other co-ordinating structures and processes referred to by interviewees as bringing the ALBs together to support environmental outcomes included Local Nature Partnerships (LNP), Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) and the Northeast Natural Environment Leaders Network (see Table 4-3). All three mechanisms were reported to enable information exchange between organisations and partners in a place. The Northeast Natural Environment Leaders Network for instance, was a historic group chaired by the Northeast EA regional manager. It brought together the three ALBs as well as other key organisations, including Northumberland County Council, the local enterprise partnership, Northumberland National Park, the Wildlife Trusts and the NFU.[39] One ALB national interviewee felt that the group had been particularly useful for sharing information and strategic goals between organisations, including ALBs. Another area level ALB interviewee described the LNP in Devon as a useful place to *'get a bit of gelling going'[FG3]* between attendees.

LNRS were referred to by several interviewees as positive structures which were supporting nature recovery and partnership working in specific locations;

> 'LNRS are a good example of partnerships. There is clear national guidance, clarity about involvement and process. There are clear responsibilities established in terms of the responsible authorities. They are resourced and we've known they're coming for a long time. These are working well.' (ALB national, FG4)

The structure and process of LNRS were described as bringing the ALBs together, such as through monthly meetings, and providing a space for relatively informal information exchange.

[39] Northeast Environmental Leaders Network: Leadership through partnership. Available at: https://www.innovationfestival.org/globalassets/documents-statement_tony-gates.pdf

National: Agreed Ways of Working

'Ways of Working' documents were referred to by three ALB interviewees as enabling the ALBs to work together to support environmental outcomes under a specific programme. Ways of Working agreements/documents set a common framework and expectations around how individuals should cooperate and collaborate. The benefit for supporting joint environmental outcomes was described by an ALB area team interviewee;

> 'I think it's quite easy for us in our organisations to remain in silos, head down getting on with stuff. And that [Ways of Working document] set the tone and the pattern for the way we should all be communicating and working together.' (ALB area, FG3)

The Nature Returns Programme also had a Ways of Working document. This was reported as beneficial by one national ALB interviewee who explained how the document intended to reduce the burden on the six local partnership projects by encouraging streamlined contact through Natural England. The document further helped ALB staff identify key points of contact in different ALBs. Indeed, two national ALB interviewees described how the NE advisors were their main points of contact for each local partnership project. This point also helps contextualise comments from the local partnership projects about the level and nature of contact they had with the ALBs i.e., being lower with the EA and FC compared to NE.

National: Knowledge Sharing

Lastly, two national ALB staff referred to joint national ALB technical deep dives under the Nature Returns Programme. They felt that the deep dives on areas such as green finance and carbon pricing helped staff across the ALBs understand the different workstreams under Nature Returns, and thus aid cross-ALB working together.

Feedback from the Nature Returns local partnership projects highlights where ALBs have effectively worked together. For example:

> 'The opportunity to have that collaboration between all those agencies has been really valuable. It's running as a programme across all the different streams of work, getting people communicating. We've had access to people we wouldn't normally. It would have been very piecemeal going to different agencies for different questions. It should work like this going forward.' (local partnership project, LPP4)

The local partnership project in question, felt that ALB collaboration had given them the opportunity to draw on specialities from across different ALBs, which supported their technical delivery of nature recovery interventions.

In summary, the interviews provided good examples of how the ALBs are working together to support environmental outcomes. There was a sense that existing relationships in priority habitats were already quite strong and that processes like the development of LNRSs and, in some regions, groups like WISP and the Northeast Natural Environment Leaders Group provided ways to enable closer working. The approach of joint working through the Nature Returns Programme had provided opportunities through Ways of Working documents and joint technical sessions and Deep Dives for ALBs to work together better to support joint environmental outcomes.

4.4.2 ALB Processes and Structures which Present Barriers to Nature Recovery in a Place

This section explores two research questions: **I) How do processes and structures within the three ALBs present barriers for nature recovery in a place? II) Are there barriers to working effectively together to achieve agreed outcomes?**

These findings present perspectives from ALB staff at all levels as well as the local partnership projects. The responses shed light on several ways in which processes and structures within ALBs present barriers to working together for nature recovery in a place. The majority of these challenges relate to the national level.

Funding Cycles and Processes

Regarding processes, five ALB staff, predominately from area/local levels, said that short funding cycles and difficult procurement processes created challenges for partnership working;

> 'Our funding cycles and procurement processes within Natural England are really difficult for partnership working. We don't have our budgets confirmed until August. We end up in quarter three rushing out collaborative agreements […] and then the partners only have quarter three and four to deliver before it's the end of financial year.' (ALB area, FG4)

> 'We feel like we're firefighting. If we're wanting to do proper landscape recovery, catchment wide restoration, we need multi-year projects… Nature recovery doesn't work on fire-fighting timescales, it's not practical.' [ALB local, FG4]

> 'With only a year, you are more focussed on delivery than the bigger picture stuff.' (local partnership project, LPP3)

Interviewees felt that short grants not only limited the amount of partnership building which can take place but could also damage trust with delivery partners if they (at an ALB) were unable to secure additional funding for multi-year projects. Short funding cycles were felt to be at odds with nature recovery aims because although funding mechanisms might work for the capital element of projects, they were not considered to fit with long-term and ongoing partnership building efforts. The response from one local partnership project further demonstrates how short-term funding can limit a partnership's ability to think more strategically by creating delivery pressure.

On a different but related point, one ALB area interviewee felt that partnerships were only seen by Defra in terms of monetary value and that *'sometimes the value of partnerships are limited and held back by our processes' [FG2]*. The interviewee felt that the enthusiasm, goodwill, and facilitation which drive partnerships are difficult to value and therefore not necessarily appreciated.

Staff Turnover and Capacity

Short grants can also compound the issue of staff churn. In the context of Nature Returns, six ALB staff across local and national levels referred to staff changes across the ALBs as presenting barriers;

> 'Staff changes amongst all the different ALBs has been a bit challenging [...] from the perspective of quite a short grant that was quite disruptive and can be quite difficult to navigate.' (ALB national, FG)

> 'There was a challenge because two of them were new to Natural England, so didn't have any connections with any area teams. It takes time to develop your networks.

> That has been a hinderance to building some of those connections.' (ALB national, N4)

The key barriers which were reported as a result of staff churn included: I) the lack of relationships between new staff who 'come in cold' and area teams and subsequent time required to build those, II) difficulties for ALB staff knowing who to contact from other ALBs, and III) hindering relationship building with the six Nature Returns local partnership projects.

IT Limitations

IT limitations was another process barrier mentioned by three staff from different ALBs. In Microsoft Teams, the Forestry Commission is considered an external organisation for the Environment Agency and Natural England, meaning FC staff could not be part of shared chats and channels. Issues with SharePoint access by the FC were also raised. These IT limitations were felt to be significant because, as one interviewee described, *'you can't necessarily have the chat that you might have in Teams, which is quite nice and quite informal' (N3),* thus hindering informal check-ins and communication. As a result, the interviewee felt that the FC is *'an extra arm's length away to the EA and NE'*.

Relationships Between National and Local Staff

Tensions between different levels of ALB staff emerged as a challenge for working together. One ALB interviewee described a separation between the local and national teams and sometimes an 'us and them' mentality which can mean that making connections to deliver projects with area teams has felt 'uncomfortable'. Moreover, a second ALB national interviewee referred to a tension between objectives at different levels within ALBs;

> 'There is tension there because we're all so tied into our own objectives [...] We have national objectives, we have local objectives and there's local delivery and there's national delivery […] we have to put a national perspective on this all the time whilst trying to reconcile that with the local objectives.' (ALB national, N5)

The same interviewee also noted that there can be tensions between technical specialists within an ALB, where national objectives for certain habitats or delivery targets might be at odds. This was also recognised by one of the local partnership projects. The interviewee felt that a joint strategic vision between the ALBs would have improved their experience. In particular, lack of alignment from senior specialists was a challenge which resulted in changes to delivery after detailed management plans had been submitted.

Lack of Aligned Objectives, Language and Geography

Furthermore, lack of policy alignment between ALBs was noted by various interviewees but not always negatively, more as an accepted fact which they worked with. Where challenges were reported these included limited mechanisms for alignment and a lack of shared language;

> 'There's a big gap of generic working together rather than project specific [working together]. Probably because the mechanism isn't there and nobody has taken initiative to pull together or maybe people don't necessarily see the value or reason to do it […] maybe we haven't quite got that clear in our heads where our common goals are that we could talk about and work with.' (ALB area, FG2)

> 'At national policy, and in terms of our strategic objectives and what we're about as organisations, there's work to do to make sure that we are more aligned. I'm not sure we've got the structures in place where those conversations can happen comfortably, safely and you can get all of that out in the open.' (ALB national, N5)

> 'The only issue with communication is that you talk to different organisations, which are trying to deliver the same things, but which still talk about it differently. That's really frustrating. There's no shared language sometimes between the three organisations' (local partnership project, LPP6)

These responses from three different interviewees highlight how the structures and processes to improve alignment and collaborative working were not felt to exist, and that a lack of common language around policy and objectives between the ALBs can be difficult for local partnerships.

In addition, a lack of capacity and resource to actively create and contribute to those processes and structures was raised. One ALB area interviewee for instance, emphasised that the ALB staff in her region recognise that they '*need to talk more'* but that none of them have made the time to build those relationships. This suggests that even if formal structures and processes for alignment between the ALBs did exist, staff may still not have the capacity to engage.

Lastly, three interviewees from separate ALBs thought that the different geographical boundaries of each ALB presented barriers to working together to support joint environmental outcomes;

> 'Some of those EA regions you'll be dealing with are different FC management structures and everything. No one's boundaries match up with NE, FC, or EA, so it is a bit of a nightmare.' (ALB area, FG2)

> 'If I [at the EA] want to align with people in my patch, I've got to speak to two or three different NE teams to do that because we're not aligned. That would make biggest difference- if we had a shared geography.' (ALB area, FG2)

These responses illustrate how the varying geographical structures of each ALB can make meeting, talking to and working with staff from other ALBs in a place more difficult, as well as presenting barriers to joint working plans for an area. Importantly, one national ALB interviewee explained how the different geographies were linked to different levels of resourcing between the ALBs, which in turn have implications for representation when working together for environmental outcomes;

> 'Resourcing is an issue – FC were resourced at 3%, now have 12%. EA have 20%, NE have the rest. What that means is that there's a whole lot of work being created by the major partner […] It tends to be the major partner who sets out the structure, the pattern of events, etc and you can't keep up as a minor partner. It's hard to be represented there.' (ALB national, N2)

The organisational and resourcing differences between ALBs caused challenges for working together in the context of LNRS for example. The same interviewee explained how meetings were initially planned for each Natural England area team, which would have meant Forestry Commission area directors attending, in some cases, multiple different meetings in order to have the same conversation. In practice therefore, the different levels of resourcing and different geographical structures of the three ALBs can impact the ease of communication between staff and more significantly, who gets their voice heard at the table.

In summary, stakeholder engagement highlighted several procedural and structural factors which present barriers to ALBs working together to support nature recovery in a place. These challenges are multifaceted and include funding mechanisms, staff churn, IT limitations and lack of alignment between ALBs. Actions to address these challenges are explored in the following section.

4.4.3 Ensuring Aligned Delivery, Complimentary Outcomes and Streamlined Processes and Duties between the ALBs

This section explores the following research question: **How can the ALBs ensure they are aligned in delivery, that outcomes are complimentary and that their processes and duties are streamlined?**

Stakeholders, primarily in national level roles from across the three ALBs, suggested several ways to improve alignment between the ALBs, namely:

1. Creating and prioritising a culture and expectation of working together;

2. Cross-ALB training; and

3. Having a joined up strategic, cross-ALB, view on land use.

It was suggested that these ideas for alignment at the national level would filter down and improve alignment at local/area levels. Stakeholders at local levels identified mis-alignment as a barrier to delivery, but did not suggest how this could be improved.

Creating a Culture and Expectation of Working Together

Firstly, it was felt that processes like Ways of Working documents helped the ALBs work more effectively together, but that ultimately it came down to creating a culture of collaboration. As one national ALB interviewee explained;

> 'It's about creating the expectation that the ALBs will talk to each other and will treat each other as equal members of this Defra mini team. The document [Ways of Working] is helpful, it sets it in stone a bit, but it is all about […] that culture of working together, a culture of trust.' (ALB national, N2)

The interviewee felt that creating this culture needs to be strategic and therefore led by Defra. Crucially, resource is necessary to ensure that collaboration between the ALBs can happen effectively;

> 'You have to have experienced people in those roles, you can't just drop in for a year here and a year there and expect to be able to create good strategic alignment. You need permanent posts at a strategic level who can work together and are tasked to work together.' (ALB national, N2)

> 'There needs to be a properly resourced team in these area teams to support partnership working. So that you've got somebody who's developing the relationships and the projects, and somebody else who's doing the back-office stuff because they're two different areas of specialism.' (ALB area, FG4)

Another national ALB interviewee commented that the 'bones' of a cross-ALB group- the Joint Operations Leadership Team (JOLT)- exist i.e., the structure is in place, but that it is not working as effectively as it could, due to a lack of commitment from the 'right people'. The findings suggest that improving alignment of delivery depends to some extent on an expectation and culture of collaborative working being set at leadership level but that this need to be supported within ALBs, down to the local level, with resource to ensure staff consistency and capacity to do partnership working.

Cross-ALB Staff Training

Cross-ALB training was identified as a process which could improve alignment and complimentary outcomes. Training from each ALB on policies and approaches to a 'cohort' of staff from all three of the ALBs was felt to be crucial by one national ALB interviewee;

> 'You need all three training all three so that you get a much more equal perspective. Might be just a couple of sessions to make sure that the staff are fully up to speed on how they are meant to be working together and what kind of ambition they're meant to be trying to achieve.' (ALB national, N2)

The interviewee noted that this 'cohort training' had been a particularly successful element of the LNRS programme. There were multiple training sessions from ALB specialists on different technical topics, including biodiversity and natural capital, which provided an opportunity for evidence and perspectives to be shared across the ALBs. The interviewee further noted that the LNRS team across the three ALBs talked about their different regulatory needs, resources, and expertise, and had more of a shared ambition and shared objectives. This response suggests that cross-ALB training on key technical topics can help build a consistent approach, or at least an understanding, between ALBs, and if need be, enable staff to represent the policies and positions of other ALBs when interacting with local partnerships and other partners.

A Strategic, cross-ALB View on Land Use

Three ALB interviewees expressed the need for a strategic view of what all ALBs are delivering, or aiming to deliver, in a landscape/across England;

> '[…] need to have a common understanding across the ALBs of where our priority delivery areas are. Not necessarily the projects, but which places across the country do we focus our efforts, because we've all got priority places. How do we share that information so that we join up as much as possible in those places?' (ALB national, N5)

Given that the ALBs each have big and complex delivery projects, some of which require consent and approval from each other, one interviewee felt that being joined up could speed up processes and ensure that the ALBs do not '*trip each other up*'. Similarly, within ALBs, a strategic approach to land use was considered important for streamlining processes and aligning delivery. One area level ALB interviewee used the example of countryside stewardship;

> '[we need] a more pragmatic approach to countryside stewardship. I think if Natural England is going to work in a focused way in specific areas with partners, then there has to be some pragmatic professional judgment. This is not going to be popular with farmers […] But I think at some point, if we're going to prioritize where nature recovery is going to happen, we're going to have to make some hard decisions like that.' (ALB area, FG4)

Together these responses point towards the value that a structure, such as a land use framework, would provide in guiding decisions about the use of land in specific landscapes where the objectives of the three ALBs may be in conflict. Indeed, one national ALB interviewee directly called for a land use framework;

> 'To resolve a lot of this, we really need a land use framework, a proper one, not just a high level one, but one that's really thinking about what we use land for and why.' (ALB national, N2)

A detailed, expert-driven land use framework could provide clarity over whose targets apply where and when, where each ALB's priority delivery areas are and present a shared vision for landscape

scale nature recovery and broader environmental outcomes. In doing so, the framework could help reduce tensions or 'friction' between the three ALBs in a place, thus improving efficiency and alignment of delivery.

In summary, there are processes and structures which can help ensure NE, the EA and FC are aligned in delivery, that outcomes are complimentary, and that activities and duties are streamlined. The research highlighted the importance of creating and prioritising a culture and expectation of working together and suggested cross-ALB training as a process which could foster alignment. Particularly interesting, were the calls for a strategic approach to nature recovery to align and improve outcomes within ALBs (i.e., between local and national priorities) and between ALBs in a place. A national land use framework could provide a structure through which such goals can be achieved.

4.5 Structures and Support for Establishing Nature Recovery Partnerships

This section addresses the following research question: **what structures and support can the ALBs give to help the effective establishment of partnerships for nature recovery?**

Interviewees from the three ALBs and the six Nature Returns local partnership projects suggested various structures and types of support for nature recovery partnerships. These are summarised in Table 4-3.

'Structures' are considered to be the systems, rules, roles and frameworks set by the three ALBs, while 'support' captures the type of assistance ALBs could provide. There is some overlap between these components and thus the table groups structures and support together. The table identifies whether the recommendation was made by an ALB interviewee and/or the local partnership projects and provides a high-level description of the type of structure/support suggested.

Table 4-3 Structures and support to enhance partnership working as suggested by interviewees

Funding

Type of structure/ support	Relevant Level for Action	Description	Source
Longer funding cycles	National	Longer term/ multi-year funding for multi-year projects. This would help reduce the risk of environmental conditions disrupting delivery	ALB Local Two Local Partnership Projects
Improve visibility and communication of funding programmes/ streams	National	Provide a coordinated funding output from Defra to improve understanding at a local and area level of what funding is available.	

Roles and Points of Contact

Type of structure/ support	Relevant Level for Action	Description	Source
Clearly defined roles between partners	All levels	Define roles and responsibilities in detail for each ALB in a partnership, including setting out what information/ input will be required and when.	ALB local and national
Cross ALB flow chart or organogram	Regional	A shared, place-based resource between the ALBs which sets out points of contact and roles.	ALB Area and National One Local Partnership Project
Higher profile Ways of Working document	All levels	Make the Ways of Working documents more well-known across ALB staff working together on a project, particularly when there is staff churn.	ALB National

Technical Delivery

Type of structure/ support	Relevant Level for Action	Description	Source
Additional technical and delviery support	National	Evidence and technical support around carbon accounting. Legal advice around landowners selling their land under a project and around the structure of landowner payments, including amounts and who bears the risk. Guidance and funding for coordination e.g. engagement with partners and landowners.	Three Local Partnership Projects

Engagement

Type of structure/ support	Relevant Level for Action	Description	Source
Earlier engagement with ALBS	Local	Greater engagement with the ALBs at the beginning of a nature recovery project, both before and after application and award stage.	Two Local Partnership Projects
Longer project development stage	National	A longer project development window to allow greater collaboration and engagement with the ALBs.	Two Local Partnership projects
Bring together the Local Partnership Projects under the Nature Returns programme	National	Provide more opportunities for Local Partnership projects to come together i.e. under the Nature Returns programme there could have been more pilot forums and starting earlier in the programme.	ALB National Two Local Partnership Projects

Consents and Regulation

Type of structure/ support	Relevant Level for Action	Description	Source
Align and automate consents and regulatory timeframes	National	This could be achieved through templates, joint formats and staff training across ALBs.	ALB National

Funding related structures and support were suggested by three local partnership projects and two ALB staff at area and local levels. The local partnership project interviewees felt that seasonality should be accounted for when funding and delivering projects. They noted that 12 months for instance was a risky timeframe because changing environmental conditions and adverse weather can significantly impact delivery on the ground. One local partnership project interviewee felt that *'the whole piece would be more effective if it were three years' [LPP2].* These responses echo a local ALB interviewee (quoted in section 4.4) who expressed the need for multi-year funding for multi-year projects in order to maintain trust between partners and to work with natural processes. Although longer funding cycles are not necessarily essential for *establishing* partnerships for nature recovery, it is evident that longer term grants are considered important for ensuring such partnerships and projects continue to be effective over time.

A second ALB interviewee felt that improving the visibility of funding streams from Defra could help ALB area staff better identify and communicate funding opportunities to nature recovery partnerships within their area/region. The interviewee explained that;

> 'There are multiple funding programmes coming out from different parts of the department. Looking at what they actually address so that we can homogenize them and […] take that out as a bundle to our partnerships. If there was a way of coordinating them and then providing that coordinated output through our future funding teams, or similar, then perhaps we might get an improved understanding of what's available and to be able to feed those into our area levels.' (ALB local, FG3)

This response highlights how coordinated funding from Defra could help area and local ALB staff to better understand the funding available for environmental outcomes which in turn would enable them to more effectively support local partnerships for nature recovery in a place.

With regards to roles and points of contact, an ALB area interviewee, and a local partnership project both suggested that a cross-ALB staff organogram could support partnership working. The ALB interviewee though that this should be a shared resource between the ALBs and needs to be place-based (although did not specify a scale). The local partnership project interviewee explained that knowing all the relevant ALB people and their responsibilities, such as the NE area team, '*probably would have incentivised greater collaborative working' [LPP3].* With an appropriate and meaningful scale, an ALB staff organogram or similar, could aid communication and relationship building, not only between partners and ALBs, but also within ALBs too. However, staff churn is likely to make this a particularly challenging resource to maintain.

In addition, in the context of the Nature Returns Programme, two ALB interviewees (national and local) felt that defining roles and responsibilities between partners in more depth would have increased efficiency. It was noted that where multiple ALBs are involved in a project/programme, it is crucial that they all understand their roles and when they will be asked to contribute information. The responses highlight how clear points of contact and roles and responsibilities could better enable both local partners and ALB staff to identify who they need to be speaking to within the Defra ALBs. Such structures and support would help communication and relationship building when establishing partnerships for nature recovery, as well as improving ways of working throughout project delivery.

Structures and support related to technical delivery were suggested by three local partnership project interviewees. They reported three technical areas where greater support from the ALBs would be beneficial:

1. Guidance on carbon accounting to supplement the focus on carbon storage and sequestration;

2. Legal advice for when landowners sell their land within a project, as well as support around the structure of landowner payments under projects, including amounts and who bears the risk; and

3. Guidance on how staff funding could be used for the coordination and partner and stakeholder engagement elements of the projects. It was noted that this need not just be monetary support but could have been an ALB staff member helping to set up a group or conducting coordination aspects for a project.

As these points were only raised by three local partnership projects, they are not presenting common recommendations from across the six local partnership projects under Nature Returns. They do, however, illustrate where individual partnerships struggled, or had particular knowledge/skills gaps, thus indicating the types of support different nature recovery partnerships may find useful.

With regards to the Nature Returns forums, while these were felt to be positive, three local partnership projects felt that the forums could have started earlier, as well as being more of them. On this point, one local partnership project noted that;

> '[the Nature Returns partnerships] still working a lot in isolation as there is not a lot of communication between different pilots. I've reached out before, but everyone is quite busy. So geographically spread out. Would have been very valuable to share information, monitoring techniques and share learning.' (local partnership project, LPP4)

The response highlights how online and in-person forums which bring local partnerships and ALB experts together, can provide a valuable space for sharing intervention techniques, knowledge, and learnings. Technical areas 1 and 2 in the above list for instance, could be delivered to multiple partnerships through a forum structure.

Furthermore, two local partnership projects suggested greater involvement from ALBs at the start of the Nature Returns Programme could have presented issues further down the line. For example, one interviewee noted that their project team did not appreciate that Natural England would have a field team doing monitoring work. They felt that speaking more with Natural England at the start, or having a workshop for instance at the initial stage could have prevented this misunderstanding, and better informed the bid and project process. The interviewee from a second local partnership project also felt that a couple more months for the development stage would have enabled the project team to engage more with the reporting and finance model under the programme.

Ultimately, with a new funding programme, greater time for project development and engagement with the ALB partners and processes at application and award stage, could support the effective establishment of partnerships for nature recovery.

In summary, the findings have brought to light several structures and types of support which the ALBs can give to help not only the effective establishment of partnerships for nature recovery, but also the success of such partnerships over time. Some structures and support were suggested by both ALB staff and local nature partnerships, such as longer funding cycles (at a Defra or Treasury level) and clear points of contact within the ALBs. Support suggested by only the local partnership projects focused on specific types of technical guidance. The findings emphasise how local partnerships for nature recovery have different skills, aims, capacities and landownership status. Given this variation, different types of structure and support are likely to be more or less useful for different partnerships in different geographies.

4.6 Good Practice and Issues to Avoid

This section reflects on the good practices and challenges which have emerged from the findings in order to explore the research questions: **I) To what extent are there common elements or best practice that could be replicated going forwards to benefit both ALBs and local partnerships? II) Are there recurring issues which should be avoided going forwards? What are the barriers to good practice?**

Table 4-4 presents a summary of good practices and examples provided by interviewees from the local partnership projects and from ALB staff at both national and local levels. The columns indicate the level which the good practice relates to.

Table 4-4 Summary of good practices identified by stakeholder engagement

Good practice	Local Partnerships	Area ALB	National ALB
Engaging a broad spectrum of stakeholders and partners to deliver nature recovery at a strategic, landscape-scale.	High	Medium	Medium
A clear, shared vision and objectives (for a landscape) which partners are committed to and passionate about. Visualisations/illustrations can be particularly powerful. For example, – Exmoor National Park's Nature Recovery Vision; Wetland creation at Budleigh Salterton; – The Dartmoor Hill Farm project- noted to be a partnership which emerged from farming/other land use interests; – Pine marten recovery in the Forest of Dean- delivered by the Vincent Wildlife Trust, Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, and Forestry England; and – Wild Ennerdale in the Lake District National Park- a partnership between three key landowners (Forestry England, National Trust, and United Utilities) and Natural England.	High	Medium	High
In-person contact between partners at the start of a project/programme, followed by regular contact and communication throughout the project.	High	Medium	Medium
Building on and utilising existing relationships, especially officer level partnerships/relationships, such as FC and NE ecologists working together in the northeast.	High	Medium	Medium
Stakeholder mapping/analysis to ensure the right groups/types of stakeholders are involved in a partnership. This can help identify who might be missing and who is needed, particularly in terms of decision-making power. For example, stakeholder mapping/analysis conducted by the Ock catchment partnership.	High	Medium	Medium
Organising engagement around the smallest player to ensure all voices are at the table.			Medium
A Ways of Working document which is jointly created and shared between partners, such as under the LNRS programme.			Medium

Good practice	Local Partnerships	Area ALB	National ALB
Cross-ALB 'cohort' training within a given programme, such as under LNRS.		Medium	High
Coordinating mechanisms/structures at regional or area scale which bring ALB staff together to focus on strategic alignment in a place. For example, Wessex Integrated Strategic Planning (WISP) and the Northeast Natural Environment Leaders Network.		Medium	High
There are strategic approaches which already encourage alignment between or within ALBs, for example the strategic approach to water across the ALBs and the Joint Operations Leadership Team (JOLT) within Natural England.			Medium
An effective leader of a partnership who can keep relevant stakeholders together and informed, for example, the Local Nature Partnership hosted by Buckinghamshire County Council.	High		

Similarly, Table 4-5 summarises issues to avoid and indicates from which perspective those issues were raised.

Table 4-5 Summary of issues to avoid identified by stakeholder engagement

Issues to avoid	Partnership	Area ALB	National ALB
Lack of shared language between the ALBs.		Medium	Medium
Lack of clarity around expected programme outputs.		Medium	Medium
Short funding cycles (i.e. lack of time and funding for partnership building etc).			Medium
IT limitations around cross-ALB communications and document sharing.			Medium
Lack of a clear purpose/reason for partnership working resulting in lack of buy-in from stakeholders and partners.	Medium	Medium	
Lack of engagement/difficulty engaging with landowners and farmers as key stakeholders with the ability to deliver nature recovery.	Medium		

Issues to avoid	Partnership	Area ALB	National ALB
Breaks in communication due to staff turnover.		Medium	Medium

In summary, stakeholder engagement highlighted eleven good practices for partnership working. Many of these align with the success factors set out in section 4.3, such as having a shared vision and effective communication. In addition, ALB interviewees noted where partnership working was currently strong or already happening within and between ALBs, as well as providing examples of local partnership projects considered to be successfully delivering outcomes through a partnership.

The issues to be avoided also reflect challenges previously identified by interviewees in regard to interacting with ALB staff and the barriers posed by ALB structures and processes. A number of these issues relate to aspects of communication, such as communicating objectives, priorities, and expected outcomes and breakdowns in lines of communication. Buy-in to the aims of a partnership is particularly important. Where this is lacking, the result can be poor attendance or lack of direction for a partnership and inability to deliver changes on the ground if key stakeholders, i.e., landowners, are not in the room.

It is clear that good practices are already happening, but that these are not consistent across different geographical areas or indeed across ALB programmes. The issues and barriers to good practice exist at both national and local levels.

5.0 Discussion and Recommendations

5.1 Discussion

This discussion considers overarching themes which emerged from the research, but which do not fall under a specific research question. Ultimately, the aim of the project was to understand how to work together better in a place. Our research, in particular feedback from the stakeholder engagement, lead us to query three elements embedded within this aim:

1. What do we mean by effective partnership working?

2. What relevance does place have on partnership working?

3. Is partnership working always needed?

These are discussed in the following sections.

5.1.1 Effective Partnership Working and Effective Partnerships

Focussing on the process of effective partnership working, we took as a baseline the nine success criteria identified by Baxter et al (2018)[40]. In a self-assessment against these criteria, the partnership leads from four of the six local partnership projects identified themselves as at working at a high level for many (5-7) of the criteria for successful partnership working. Two partnerships indicated they were working at a high level for fewer criteria (1-3). As it currently stands, this assessment is as much likely to indicate a difference in perspective of those assessing operating levels as it is the operational performance of the partnership itself. It would be interesting to repeat this self-evaluation exercise with other partners in the local partnership projects to provide a more rounded view. It would also be interesting to compare results from this assessment focussed on the processes of partnership working with the on-going evaluation being undertaken by ICF on the outcomes of the partnerships and the projects being delivered.

When asked to identify key success factors, lead partners referred to characteristics in line with those identified in the literature review, primarily associated with the development of relationships and plans linked to the early stages of partnership building. Key success factors for effective partnership working relevant to the Nature Returns projects at this stage were:

- Having a shared vision was crucial for helping partnerships strategize and engage external partners. Taking time at the start to clarify this vision and understand each partner's perspectives was seen as critical.

- Developing strong working relationships, often built on pre-existing connections, enabled trust, efficiency, and high-quality delivery. Staff consistency was noted as important for fostering these relationships.

- Involving a broad spectrum of the 'right' partners, such as landowners and community groups, provided partnerships with diverse skillsets, decision-making abilities, and local buy-in. Fourth, creating a collaborative approach through trust, openness and positive attitudes helped build social capital and overcome differences between partners.
- Effective, and regular communication was essential, with early in-person engagement followed by consistent virtual contact identified as good practices.

[40] Baxter, D., Rees, Y., and Chowdhury, T. (2018) Framework for the monitoring and evaluation of catchment partnership working

5.1.2 Influence of 'Place' on Partnership Working

This research project placed particular emphasis on where partnership working happens, i.e., place. Place determines the physical assets or 'natural capital' of a location. However, there are other factors embedded in the context of 'place' which can influence partnership working, namely:

- The history of partnership working and the relationships, stakeholders and visions/objectives which already exist in a place;
- The people and 'personalities' involved in partnership working; and
- The organisational status of the host organisation regarding landownership and financial stability.

Physical Assets and Natural Capital

Physical geography in terms of natural capital assets and land use can influence the dynamic of partnership working and relationships in a place. As explored in section 4.4, priority/protected habitats were noted by two ALB staff (national and area) as being places where the three ALBs have worked particularly well together due to strong officer level relationships. This was felt to be the case in Northumberland for instance.

Alternatively, two ALB interviewees and one local partnership project interviewee described how certain habitat or landscape characteristics can make partnership working difficult;

> 'To some extent the natural assets and the economics that we work with lead to tensions in some areas. From a nature recovery perspective, there's loads of opportunity … to restore peatland. From the forestry sector point of view, it's really important for domestic supply of timber […] In some places you have a history or tradition of a certain activity which can lead to more tension than in others.' (ALB national, N2)

> 'The biggest challenge being is that we're in a very traditional farming community - change always comes to Exmoor very slowly. That lack of understanding across all organisations - for example with the National Park you find a very fixed view on what the landscape should look like. Yet all government policy is basically saying the landscape is going to change. So that can be a bit frustrating.' (local partnership project, LPP6)

These responses demonstrate how the existence of certain habitat types, land uses and resources in a place can cause tensions between stakeholders who have different views on what a landscape should look like. An area level ALB interviewee further described how habitats can be subject to conflicting professional opinions. For instance, officers and specialists, even within the same ALB, sometimes value different habitats in different ways or vary in their interpretation of a statute or condition of a habitat. One Nature Returns local partnership project interviewee noted where a lack of alignment between habitat specialists had caused a fundamental change in how they delivered the project after the contract had been awarded. This resulted in delays to part of the project delivery.

In addition, whether a nature recovery project is in a rural or urban location appears to influence partnership working in a place. One local partnership project felt that delivering nature recovery across scattered sites in an urban location meant there was a greater need for stakeholder engagement. Because much of the project work is on public green space, the interviewee described how the population of the city are '*effectively a sort of partner*'. As a result, the partnership has needed to place greater emphasis on translating and communicating the project to the public. The interviewee noted that this has created more work and '*heavy lifting*' for the local partnership project team.

Conflicting agendas and opinions regarding physical resources and land use in a landscape can present challenges for partnership working in a place. Key stakeholders in a location may not be aligned around one vision/future direction for a certain habitat or the wider landscape and this can cause tensions. Urban nature recovery locations may also require greater public engagement due to proximity between interventions and local people. These examples point to a key role for national policy to play in setting a decision-making framework for how and where landscapes across England can deliver multiple benefits, perhaps as suggested by some interviewees providing a framework guiding priority land-uses by area to guide decisions that may potentially be misaligned.

Existing Partnerships, Different People and Personalities

When seeking to develop or introduce new partnership working in a place, existing partnerships, relationships and 'personalities' need to be attended to. Multiple stakeholders operating in a place, even if they have the same objectives for a landscape, can present challenges for partnership working. In particular, competition for funding between environmental NGOs operating in a space was reported to be an issue by two interviewees. One ALB area interviewee noted that a result of this 'crowded space', is that NGOs have been 'guarded' in their activities and having a joint vision.

While a crowded space can create competition, where positive relationships already exist between stakeholders, this can benefit new partnership working. One national ALB interviewee for instance, reported that knowing the key players in the area and having good working relationships already, meant that working with the local partnership project in the area was easier compared to the other five. Less time was needed for relationship building and knowing who to speak to was less of a challenge. In addition, an ALB area interviewee described how the partnerships and governance structure around a national park were particularly mature and long-established, with good mutual understanding between partners. Overall, this was felt to be beneficial because it enabled partnership working to happen 'organically', although the same interviewee also recognised that established partnerships could mean that people are locked into ways of working.

Pre-existing relationships in a place can provide a valuable network of skills, resources, and connections, as well as existing structures, to tap into for nature recovery in a location. Indeed, as identified in the literature review, a range of individuals with a diversity of skillsets is a key success factor for partnership working. These key individuals will hold different positions in different places, and may, as one national ALB interviewee noted, have varying attitudes and risk appetites towards new projects/programmes. Understanding where the skillsets, leadership and power lie in existing place-based networks is crucial for partnership working. Identifying, and providing a mandate to, individuals with the right skills, focus and ability to convene people in a place and hold a partnership together are key to identify.

Organisational Status

Looking across the six local partnership projects, organisational status, in terms of landownership and financial stability, emerged as a factor which influences partnership working in a place. For example, one national level ALB interviewee felt that because national park authorities are not landowners, they have to be 'better' at stakeholder engagement, especially with farmers, in order to deliver projects on the ground. For such organisations, working positively with partners and stakeholders is more of a necessity compared to large landowning organisations. The interviewee felt that the latter type of organisation has greater control over their land and therefore perhaps less of a need to build strong partnerships and consensus from stakeholders to deliver interventions.

Furthermore, a second national level ALB interviewee suggested that the financial stability of organisations can influence relationship building in a partnership;

> 'Financial stability gives a lot of confidence for those people working in the partnership to be able to say yes, I can talk to you about that because [...] I can afford to behave in a way that is expansive or expressive because I'm not worried

about the finances of this project affecting the whole organization.' (ALB national, N1)

These findings build on the 'power and ownership' factors identified in the literature review. They highlight how the financial and landownership status of an organisation can impact both the extent of partnership working as well as how individuals approach relationship building.

Ultimately, when looking to establish new partnerships or partnership working in a place, the geographical, social, and economic context matters. Understanding the natural capital and history of a location are important for identifying possible conflicts and tensions in a landscape, while understanding where the leadership and influential personalities are in a place will help ensure buy-in. Recognising these factors will help enable good practices to be built on and replicated across different areas.

5.1.3 Is Partnership Working Always Needed?

Partnership was at the core of Nature Returns. This was the case at both a programme level, with the ALBs working in partnership to oversee and deliver projects, and also at the project level, as the grant scheme was competitive and only open to partnerships (not individuals). Projects were then assessed against the benefits created for biodiversity, improvements to capture carbon and benefits to people.

Because most partnerships are not entities in themselves, they cannot receive grant funding. Instead, funding is provided to a nominated partnership lead which inevitably puts a degree of power into one organisation. As the research has shown, partnership working is not straightforward. There needs to be time to build relationships, before (ideally) work is started on practical tasks, but the research found that there was not always the time to do such partnership building. For some tasks, partnership working is essential, especially when land is owned by different organisations, and working to develop trusted relationships will be vital to the success of landscape projects. We would argue that there are long term benefits of partnership working that make it valuable in itself e.g. development of networks, learning from others, sharing resources etc.

However, there may be some projects where full partnership working is not needed. It may be that a task and finish approach is applicable, where one organisation leads and directs the work with support from other organisations. What is clear, is that to be effective, partnership working needs to be intentional. To enable this, each project/programme could be subject to an assessment of whether partnership working (sharing goals, power, and resources) is the most appropriate model of governance. Once decided, then time and resource need to be allocated to the work of partnership building i.e. developing a shared vision, objectives, and trust.

5.2 Recommendations

Interviewees made several suggestions for structures and support to enhance partnership working which are summarised in Table 4-3 and relate to funding, roles and communication, technical delivery and consents are regulation. We have considered these and wider points in developing our recommendations for Natural England to enable good practices across their areas and projects.

1. **Work together with other National ALBs to provide clear strategic direction**

I. **Create and prioritise a culture and expectation of working together between ALBs** nationally that filters down to local/area levels. The Nature Returns programme provides an opportunity to demonstrate this and should build on current working practices to develop clearer shared visions on partnership working and land-use change. This includes making Ways of Working documents more well-known across ALB staff, creating a cross-ALB flow chart or organogram and a shared place-based resource setting out points of contact and roles.

II. **Bring ALB staff at a regional level together to build relationships:** create a mechanism, such as an annual in-person meeting, which enables staff from across the EA, FC, and NE to come together at a regional level with the purpose of building relationships. This could include identifying opportunities for shared office space within a region.

III. **Help build connections between the ALBs and improve staff understanding of each other's objectives, priorities, and operating procedures at all levels:** this could be achieved in a number of ways, for example, using cross-ALB training (as for LNRS which was highlighted as good practice) and simple solutions such as using shared office space, establishing secondment opportunities (several mentioned the advantages of having worked in other ALBs previously). This would help find ALBs align on solutions in areas of contention and enable ALBs to provide a more cohesive picture to local partnerships working across the different regimes.

IV. **Establish an agreed vision for partnership working (for the Nature Returns Programme) across ALBs at a national level:** The EA, FC and NE should come together at national level to discuss partnership working to develop a shared understanding of what 'partnership working' is and when it is desirable/useful for project delivery. Ultimately the ALBs need to agree on whether partnership working has a value, in all or some situations and agree a position on the level of partnership required going forward. Being intentional about what partnership is and is not, should improve understanding of success factors.

V. To inform the vision on partnership working, NE and other national ALBs should **consider the relationship, if any, between effective partnership working and effective project delivery. This could be done by reflecting on** the ICF evaluation of the Nature Returns programme, which focussed on impact, views from the six local partnership projects on the level of partnership working (see table in section 4.3.2) and their own views on how the projects have been delivered in each of the local partnership projects. This will help shed light on the relationship between level of partnership working (process) and project delivery (impact) i.e., whether partnership working was integral to effective delivery, or whether project delivery did not require partnership working.

VI. **Develop a decision tree for when to use partnerships and which type of relationship will best meet the objectives of the project.** Natural England should develop a decision tree to support choices around when to use partnerships and the types of relationships which may be suitable in different situations. This links to ideas around types of engagement – from one way

information provision through to co-design[41]. What is clear from stakeholder engagement research and practice, is that it is important to understand the objectives of engagement, and this is the same for relationships with other organisations. It is suggested that consideration of the types of relationships NE wants to have with other organisations for different projects would be the starting point for a decision tree and then it would take the user through questions around the objectives of the project. For instance, if the programme aim is to attract green funding and finance into nature, broad, landscape scale partnerships can help generate investable propositions at scale, which are more appealing to large investors and funders. Alternatively, if the aim of the programme is to gather data on specific interventions, a narrower partnership between delivery bodies and scientific organisations, focused on knowledge and expertise sharing, may be more appropriate.

VII. **Develop a joined up strategic, cross-ALB, view on delivery priorities for future partnership/nature recovery programmes**. Research into Nature Returns highlighted that although there was consensus on the broad aims, at a detailed implementation level differences in priorities emerged during projects and hampered progress. In part, this consensus view will be informed by the Land-use Framework when published. Although it is difficult to pre-agree positions on all issues where priorities may conflict, as a starting point, NE could list the key technical disagreements emerging from this round of projects, facilitate discussion between the experts at the national or local levels, and share agreed decisions to indicate the likely position on similar challenges.

2. **Clarify roles, responsibilities, expectations, and relationships**

IV. **Clarify roles and responsibilities within a programme at all levels and between ALBs.** ALB staff should consider together what structures, i.e., governance structures, are needed to facilitate local delivery on the ground. This may be different for each ALB, depending on their respective roles in the programme, and thus an open and early discussion would help to clarify expectations going forward.

V. **Clarify expectations on local teams:** when coordinating a programme, Natural England should provide clarity on what is expected of area/local teams, particularly around roles and responsibilities in partnership working. The partnerships should also be made aware of all roles and how these relate to their activities and the roles of the NE project co-ordinator.

VI. **Recognise the crucial role of relationships and require a full and proper handover to avoid setbacks.** Ensure partners and ALB staff have time to build relationships. If staff leave, or change roles, there should be sufficient handover periods to ensure new staff are properly introduced to contacts and have a good understanding of the relationships held by the former employee (including unresolved issues, challenges, or opportunities). This should help minimise disruption for local partners and ensure points of communication are not lost.

3. **Funding, consents, and regulation**

IV. **Explore opportunities with Defra and Treasury for multi-year and/or more flexible funding and delivery requirements** recognising that partnerships take time to build and that environmental conditions can disrupt planned delivery.

V. **Explore opportunities with to improve visibility and communication of funding programmes available in a locality**. This could involve creating overview pages on the Defra website, showing how funding streams are connected as well as more widespread promotion of funding

[41] Wilcox (1996) The Guide to Effective Participation (partnerships.org.uk)

available using existing websites such as the CaBA website. NE could follow-up with the partnership projects to ask specifically how this could be achieved.

VI. **Explore the potential to align or automate consents for nature-based projects**. NE should facilitate a conversation with operational departments across the ALBs to discuss opportunities to overcome this barrier to progress highlighted by interviews who suggested better alignment could be achieved through templates, joint formats and staff training across ALBs.

4. **Provide specific support to local partnerships**

VII. **Have a longer project development stage to discuss project ideas thoroughly with partners at pre-application:** Partner leads referred to this as being particularly valuable where it had occurred and also a barrier where disagreements had been identified after the project had started. Pre-application discussions should as far as possible include some of the 'difficult' conversations around land-use priorities and should be escalated to national experts to resolve contentious issues as far as possible before the project starts.

VIII. **Hold start-up meetings with each local project** to include all relevant area ALB staff and the local delivery partners which have received funding. This would provide an opportunity for:

a. Introductions between the project delivery team, the ALB programme staff and, crucially, other ALB area staff beyond the programme who may be able to support delivery;

b. Confirming communication channels and timing, in particular to identify the role of the NE pilot co-ordinator and of other ALB support staff. This should also set out what information/input is required and when;

c. Setting expectations about partnership working and delivery;

d. Identifying and discussing risks for project delivery, which might for example include misaligned objectives for the area, lack of key skills, or poor relationships between key stakeholders, and to identify mitigation measures to reduce these risks; and

e. Sign-posting to local and national support that can be provided and how to access this. From the local partnership projects' self-assessment (see section 4.3.2), drawing on local and national support was reported as low or medium by four of the six interviewees. Communicating ALB area staff positions and roles beyond the programme would help local partnerships identify points of contacts within ALBs where these relationships do not already exist.

IX. **Develop guidance for local lead partners, supported by ALBS, to establish strong partnership working.** Guidance could include:

a. A checklist of actions which local partnerships and ALBs can take to help develop a partnership or strong partnership working. For example, initial steps may include baseline mapping to identify ongoing related work, any specificities of place (see factors in 5.1.2) and stakeholder mapping. This could be followed by how to set up a partnership, establish ways of working and terms of reference, develop a vision, action plan and funding programme. For local partnership projects, these steps could be set out in funding conditions if a partnership or partnership working is required. Guidance on these steps has been produced for other partnership programmes and could be adapted.

b. Sign-posting to information on 'tips and trips' e.g. as captured in Table 4-4 and Table 4-5 which could be consolidated and supported with a library of case-studies.

c. Recommendations to self-evaluate the maturity of the partnership using tools identified in the literature review and used briefly when engaging the partnerships in this project (outputs shown in **Error! Reference source not found.**).

X. **Encourage cross-project peer to peer learning by promoting the programme and including learning events**. Feedback was that shared learning events were valued but came too late. We would recommend that NE:

a. **Host an in-person programme launch event** with relevant ALB experts and all local partners/bodies responsible for delivering the projects (i.e., those local partnership projects which have received funding). This launch event should also initiate a peer-to-peer learning process across local partnership projects.

b. **Programme regular on-line learning events** including simple facilitated sharing sessions (in addition to the focussed training sessions) so that lead partners can exchange experiences and through peer-to-peer learning help to solve challenges.

XI. **Ask partnerships early on about specific support needs**. For the Nature Returns local partnership projects, interviewees flagged additional support needed around: evidence and technical support regarding carbon accounting; legal advice around landowners selling their land under a project and around the structure of landowner payments, including amounts and who bears the risk; and guidance and funding for coordination e.g., engagement with partners and landowners.

XII. **Provide local partnership projects with updated consolidated briefings on relevant national environmental policy**, the purpose being to acknowledge areas of policy/delivery tension and to outline how any land-use conflicts can be avoided. In the future, this briefing could draw upon the proposed national land use framework.

Appendix

A.1.0 Interview and Focus Group Questions

A.1.1 Local Partnership Projects: Key Interview Questions

Can you describe the partnership which is delivering the XXX project? Who are you partners and how do you work together on the project?

How often do you meet with your partners? What form do these meetings take? (face2face, frequent, uncommon, check-ins etc)

What is working well? What is not working well?

Thinking about establishing and developing XXX project, what enabled you to successfully set up your partnership?

a. What worked well when setting up XXX partnership?

b. What has helped the partnership to continue/to develop successfully over time?

What could have made the setup of XXX partnership more successful/effective?

Where would you say your partnership is currently functioning on this matrix?

How do you interact with EA, FC, and NE staff?

c. How often do you meet/speak, where/how do you meet/speak,

d. What is the basis for these interactions (i.e., to ask or receive advice, to provide updates, informal catch up, formal reporting etc),

e. What sort of relationship do you have? How is this relationship sensitive to the project/location?

f. What's worked well about these relationships?

g. What's not worked well? In what ways have these relationships been challenging? Why do you think this is the case?

Thinking back to when you set up the XXX project, what support did the local and national staff from EA, FC and NE provide? Was this enough? Was it the right type of support? How could this support have been more effective? What would you have changed?"

Thinking about how the XXX project has progressed and developed, what ongoing support have the local and national staff from EA, FC and NE provided? Was this enough? Was it the right type of support? How could this support have been more effective? What would you have changed?"

To what extent do you feel that the three ALBs (EA, FC, and NE) have been aligned/worked together in supporting your partnership?

What do you think are the top three barriers to working effectively together with the EA, FC, and NE in the context of XXX project? What should be avoided in the future?

What top 3 things would improve your experience of working with the EA, NE, and FC in the context of XXX project?

A.1.1.1 Local Partnership Projects Self-Assessment Table

Table 5-1 Success Factors for Partnership Working Self-Assessment Table

People and Relationships

How would you currently rate these aspects of partnership working for your Nature Returns Local Partnership Project?	**Local Partnership Project response (Low, Medium, High)**
1.leadership style with the right capacity and skills	
2.Have the right individuals from the right organisations actively and consistently supporting	
3.Build trust and good respectful working relationships to create strong foundations	

Plans and Processes

How would you currently rate these aspects of partnership working for your Nature Returns Local Partnership Project?	**Local Partnership Project response (Low, Medium, High)**
4. Have a long-term plan to show the strategic importance of projects	
5.Are agile and able to respond to (funding) opportunities as they arise	
6.Share work amongst partners	
7.Evaluate themselves and respond to policy changes	

Tools, Data and Methods

How would you currently rate these aspects of partnership working for your Nature Returns Local Partnership Project?	**Local Partnership Project response (Low, Medium, High)**
8.Underpin work with up-to-date data and evidence	
9.Use local and national support and support from other partnerships and umbrella groups	

A.1.2 Focus Groups: Key Interview Questions

What is your role in supporting XXX local partnership project? If you don't support this project specifically, what is your role under the Nature Returns Programme?

For those who work directly with XXX local partnership project/the Nature Returns Programme**,** how do you interact with XXX local partnership project? How often do you meet, speak, what do you do in these interactions? What sort of relationship do you have with the pilot project?

h. What's working well? What's not working well?

i. Thinking back to when XXX project was set up and how it's developed since, what factors enabled the partnership to establish effectively?

j. What could have made the setup of XXX partnership more successful/effective?

k. What additional support do you think the local partnership project could have benefitted from?

For those who don't work directly with XXX local partnership project, can you explain how you work at with local partnerships, who do you work with, what sort of relationships do you have?

l. What is working well? What is not working well? What barriers and challenges have you faced?

m. When thinking about your experiences of local partnership working, what would you do differently in the future?

n. What additional support could your partnership working at a local level benefit from?

Now thinking about your counterparts in other ALBs- how have those relationships worked, in the context of this local partnership project/in this location?

How have you worked with other ALBs at the local/area level? How often do you speak with other ALB advisors and area team staff?

o. What has worked well? What barriers and challenges have you faced?

In the context of XXX project, how do you interact with the national EA, FC and NE nature return staff? How often do you meet/speak, purpose of the interactions, what sort of relationship do you have?

p. What's worked well? What barriers and challenges have you faced?

Do you have a process for resolving conflict with your counterparts in other ALBs?

Is there a process for supporting each other across ALBs when working with local partnerships?

What could improve your partnership working going forward?

Thinking about the formal structures and processes within the different ALBs- how have these presented barriers?

Reflecting on your experience with XXX project, how could you, in each Defra ALB, improve alignment and efficiency of delivery? How could you avoid duplication of effort or conflicting outcomes?

A.1.3 National ALB Staff: Key Interview Questions

I. How do you work with other ALBs nationally to support the six pilot projects? (Frequency, aims etc)

q. What's working well about these relationships? What's not working well?

How do you interact with your counterparts in the other ALBs at area and local levels? How often do you meet/speak, what are the aims of these interactions, what sort of relationship do you have?

r. What's working well about these relationships? What's not working well?

Can you give one critical success factor for working in partnership with other ALBs?

s. What could be improved?

How well have the processes and structures within the EA, FC and NE worked together to support XXX local partnership project at national and local levels?

t. If they have worked well, what made this effective? What helped ALBs work together to support the local partnership projects?

u. If they have not worked well, what barriers have processes, practices and structures within EA, FC and NE presented?

v. How do you think processes and structures within the EA, FC and NE could work better together to support local nature recovery partnerships?

Have there been any geographical differences? If yes, why do you think this has been the case?

Can you give examples of good practices of partnership working for nature recovery in a place?

How could ALBs improve alignment of delivery with the other ALBs so that outcomes are complimentary, and processes and duties are streamlined? How could you streamline effort and avoid conflicting outcomes?

How do you interact with the local partnership project teams?

w. What is working well, what is not working so well, what could usefully change?

What worked well when setting up the local partnership projects? What has helped the partnership to continue/to develop successfully over time?

What could have made the setup of the local partnership projects more successful/effective?

What do you think are the main challenges that the partnerships are facing when interacting with the ALBs? (at local, area, national levels)

What do you think could be done to improve this?

What are the top 3 recurring issues for partnership working– at national, local or partnership level, that should be avoided going forwards? What top 3 good practices should be replicated?

A.1.4 Interviewee and Focus Group ID Codes

Table 0-1 Local partnership Project interviewee ID code

Interviewee ID	Local Partnership Project	Interviewees
LPP1	Derwent Living Forest Project	Two
LPP2	Ox-Bucks Freshwater Network	One
LPP3	Plymouth Natural Grid	Two
LPP4	Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery	Two
LPP5	Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change	One
LPP6	Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration Project	One

Table 0-2 Focus group ID code

Focus group ID code	Relevant local partnership project(s)	Region	Size	Position and Organisation of Attendees
FG1	Derwent Living Forest Project	Derwent/ Derbyshire/ East Midlands	Four	1. Senior Advisor – Nature Returns Programme, Natural England 2. LNRS Senior Adviser for Derbyshire, Natural England 3. Natural Course Programme Manager, Environment Agency 4. Strategic Senior Flood Risk Management Advisor, Partnership and Strategic Overview - East Midlands Area, Environment Agency
FG2	Ox-Bucks Freshwater Network	Oxfordshire/ Buckingha mshire/ South-East England	Six	1. Catchment Coordinator, Thames Area, Environment Agency 2. Local nature recovery strategy (LNRS) Senior Adviser, Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, Natural England 3. Senior Adviser – Nature Returns Programme, Natural England 4. Catchment Manager (Essex), Environment Programme Team, East Anglia Area, Environment Agency 5. Local Nature Recovery Advisor, Southeast and London, Forestry Commission 6. Local Nature Recovery Advisor, Southeast and London, Forestry Commission
FG3	Severn Solutions for Nature Recovery, Plymouth Natural Grid and Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration Project	Southwest England	Five	1. Senior Advisor for the Nature Recovery Network in Wessex, Natural England 2. Senior Adviser – Nature Returns Programme, Natural England 3. Catchment Coordinator - Tamar Management Catchment, Environment Agency 4. Partnership and Expertise Manager for Southwest England, Forestry Commission 5. Nature Recovery Advisor southwest, supporting the Nature Returns projects in the southwest, Forestry Commission
FG4	Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change	Northumber land/Northe ast England	Four	1. River basin coordinator, Newcastle, and LNRS Senior Advisor for Northumberland and North of Tyne, Natural England. 2. Partnership and expertise manager, North East England, Forestry Commission

Focus group ID code	Relevant local partnership project(s)	Region	Size	Position and Organisation of Attendees
				3. Tyne Catchment Coordinator, Environment Agency 4. Senior Advisor – Nature Returns Programme, Natural England

Table 0-3 Defra ALB national staff interviewee ID codes

Interview code	Defra ALB	Number of Interviewees	Roles/positions of interviewees
N1	Forestry Commission	Two	1. Carbon and Water Advisor 2. Carbon and Water Projects Manager
N2	Forestry Commission	One	1. Nature Recovery Policy Advisor
N3	Environment Agency	Two	1. Catchment Funding Senior Advisor, leading workstream four of the Nature Returns Programme 2. Project support officer for Nature Returns
N4	Natural England	One	1. Landscape Partnership Project Coordinator, Nature Returns Programme
N5	Natural England	Three	1. Senior Heathland Specialist 2. Senior Grassland Specialist 3. Deputy Director in Strategy

A.1.5 Lead partners in 2023/24

For the first 6 partnerships the funding was received by:

1. The National Trust (for the Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration Project)
2. Groundwork NE & Cumbria (for Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change (WRCC)
3. Plymouth City Council, working in collaboration with the National Trust (for Plymouth's Natural Grid Nature Based Solutions for Climate Change at the Landscape Scale project)
4. Derbyshire Wildlife Trust for its Derwent Living Forest partnership-led pilot project (for the Derwent Living Forest Project, part of the Derwent Connections Programme). This project aims to create

connected woody habitats between the Northern and National Forests to allow movement of species in response to climate change. It will also develop an economically viable programme to support landowners to create and expand dynamic and resilient ecosystems.

5. Freshwater Habitats Trust (for the Oxfordshire–Buckinghamshire Freshwater Network)

6. Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust to work with Hasfield Court Estate (for Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery)

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