



Nature Returns Programme Evaluation

Final report NECR635

21st March 2024

Submitted to:

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Nature Returns Programme Evaluation

Final report

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Contents

Executive summary	3
1. Introduction	6
Research scope	6
Report structure	11
2. Carbon, biodiversity and other ecosystem services	13
Key findings	14
Recommendations	24
Next steps for the evaluation	25
3. Blended finance	26
Key findings	26
Recommendations	33
Next steps for the evaluation	33
4. Programme collaboration and management	35
Key findings	35
Recommendations	48
Next Steps for the evaluation	49
5. Stakeholder engagement and dissemination of learning	50
Key findings	51
Recommendations	63
Next steps for the evaluation	63
6. Capturing outcomes	64
Key findings	64
Recommendations	69
Next steps for the evaluation	69
7. Conclusions and forward planning	70
Next steps	73
A1. Nature Returns Evaluation Framework	75
A2. UK CEH monitoring analysis report	86
A3. Strength of evidence assessment	87
A4. Research methods	88
Research approach	88
Research tools	88
A5. Webinar Feedback Questionnaire Results	94
A6. Programme Monitoring Survey Data	97
A7. Research tools	108
Survey Questions: Programme Monitoring Survey	108
Interview Topic Guide: Programme Partners (workstream and Forestry Commission teams)	113
Webinar Feedback Questionnaire	115
Nature Returns Programme Partners workshop guide	116

Case Studies Topic Guide: Partnership project Leads.....	117
Scoping Topic Guide: Land Managers	121
Partnership project community workshop guide	123
Topic Guide: Policy Stakeholders Baseline Interviews	126

Acronyms

WS1	Workstream 1
WS2	Workstream 2
WS3	Workstream 3
WS4	Workstream 4
NE	Natural England
EA	Environment Agency
FC	Forestry Commission
RBG Kew	Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew
NbS	Nature-based Solutions
UK CEH	UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology and Strategy Development Solutions Ltd
LiDAR	Light Detection and Ranging
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
GIAA	Government Internal Audit Agency

Executive summary

Nature Returns is a Defra – DESNZ sponsored programme supported by the Treasury's Shared Outcomes Fund and led by Natural England in close partnership with the Environment Agency, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (RBG Kew) at Wakehurst and the Forestry Commission. The programme, which comprises four workstreams and six partnership projects, aims to learn about how carbon accumulates in different UK habitats over time and how nature-based solutions (NbS) approaches can be implemented and sustainably funded.

ICF has been commissioned to conduct an independent evaluation of the programme and provide learning support, until March 2025. The focus of this first year of evaluation was on partnership project selection, engagement and delivery, collaboration between programme partners, early and emerging outcomes and outputs and the processes in place for programme monitoring. A realist evaluation approach, where appropriate, was taken to help develop understanding of the programme's successes and areas for improvement as well as the driving forces behind them. Interviews with workstream leads (13), workstream teams (19), local project team members (29) and land managers (6); workshops with programme partners (1) and partnership project communities (6); analysis of programme monitoring documents (473); feedback questionnaires (2); and a survey (1) were used to gather evidence to answer questions relating to:

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

The evaluation found overall that:

- Good progress has been made on creating and restoring a variety of habitats and adding to the carbon sequestration and storage and blended finance evidence bases.
- For several workstreams and partnership projects, initial objectives have had to be revised.
 - WS4 has revised the scope of the blended finance work with the partnership projects due to the differing base knowledge and organisational set ups for each of the partnership project lead organisations.
 - WS2 and WS3 are extending their data collection and will conduct data analysis over a longer period than originally planned.
 - Several partnership projects have made changes to the scope of habitat works for a variety of reasons.
- Some early outcomes, such as increased collaboration between delivery partners and visual landscape change, are evident but the majority of the programme's outcomes will become apparent in the longer term (10 years +) and will require long-term monitoring to understand impact.

- Working with the Defra Group's financial processes has been a significant challenge and delays have reduced the time available for all workstreams to carry out the planned activities and led to the addition of measurements at a series of 'chronosequence sites' within WS2.
- Related to this, the lack of flexibility in awarding funding and approving financial change requests limits the ability of projects to undertake habitat creation, restoration and monitoring activities during optimal periods (seasons).
- Programme partner collaboration has been positive and valuable in addressing challenges and establishing clear ways of working although greater cross-workstream sharing and integration would help to maximise the impact of the programme.
- The partnership projects selected are a good basis for testing how NbS can work in practice in different circumstances.
- The evaluation has found that the partnership projects have worked best where:
 - they include pre-existing relationships with landowners and land managers who are environmentally minded,
 - the habitat creation and restoration work builds on a strong landscape scale vision,
 - teams take the time to engage with stakeholders in a number of ways and build relationships with local communities, farming stakeholders and volunteers,
 - there is a clear understanding of the benefits of blended finance and strong organisational motivation to work to develop opportunities for partnerships and financing,
 - programme support is developed to suit individual project needs,
 - there is strong, solutions focused project management, trust between team members and clear divisions of responsibilities, and
 - teams utilise pre-existing local connections to procure the best local expertise and build support.
- To date, dissemination of the programme's activities and outputs has been limited. Sharing programme learning, through the Nature Returns campaign, with relevant government departments and wider interested organisations will be crucial for generating broader impact across carbon science, blended finance and NbS.

Following on from this, [recommendations](#) for ways in which the Nature Returns programmes and projects can improve and considerations for the next year include:

- Exploring how data collection could occur on a longer timescale so as to evidence the impact of habitat creation and restoration, including through extended funding or training of local project teams.
- Decoupling NbS partnership project funding from habitat creation and restoration completion dates and allowing longer project development and planning phases through the development of long-term funding plans, identification of additional funding streams and sharing of learning on NbS project funding in the wider policy landscape.

- Exploring ways in which workstreams can enhance their work with the partnership projects, bringing together research and creating useful resources to enhance collaboration.
- Providing greater guidance to partnership projects on monitoring, communications and other requirements for the next funding period.
- Facilitating forums, workshops, and events to share information across programme partners and partnership projects and co-developing plans for the legacy of the programme.
- Increasing integration between partnership project teams and programme partners around land manager and community engagement to help partners to understand the barriers NbS projects face and identifying areas where partners can support project team communications.
- Exploring how to share, communicate and use evidence generated by the programme both between workstreams and partnership projects and with a range of databases, tools, and stakeholders.
- Prior to engagement and dissemination, exploring with intended audiences how to make outputs and events relevant, interesting, useful and in an appropriate format.
- Ensure adequate time is given to dissemination and engagement to allow for ongoing conversations with stakeholders, for relationships to be built and to explore how sharing knowledge can lead to change.

1. Introduction

Nature Returns (formerly Nature-based Solutions for Climate Change at the Landscape Scale programme) is a Defra – DESNZ sponsored programme supported by the Treasury's Shared Outcomes Fund and led by Natural England in close partnership with the Environment Agency, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew (RBG Kew) at Wakehurst and the Forestry Commission. The programme aims to learn about how carbon accumulates or is released from different habitats in different circumstances and explore how to integrate nature-based solutions with other land management objectives, and to make them financially viable. It does so through four workstreams and six local partnership projects, which are piloting NbS approaches and are listed here with their leading organisations:

- Workstream 1 (WS1): Programme and partnership project management (Natural England)
 - Partnership projects*
 - Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration Project: National Trust
 - Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change: Groundwork NE & Cumbria
 - Plymouth's Natural Grid: Plymouth City Council
 - Derwent Forest Landscape Recovery Project: Derbyshire Wildlife Trust
 - Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery: Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust
 - Oxfordshire–Buckinghamshire Freshwater Network: Freshwater Habitats Trust
- Workstream 2 (WS2): Comparative assessment of carbon storage and sequestration (Natural England)
- Workstream 3 (WS3): Quantifying above and below ground carbon storage (RBG Kew)
- Workstream 4 (WS4): Blended finance and governance (Environment Agency)

Research scope

ICF, supported by the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology and Strategy Development Solutions Ltd, has been commissioned to conduct an independent evaluation of the programme and provide learning support, until March 2025. The evaluation will assess the implementation and functioning of the programme as a whole, and how it can measure impact in the medium- to long-term. It will also help to develop the evidence base to showcase the progress of each aspect of the programme. This report synthesises and presents findings based on evidence collection across the first year of the evaluation period, comprising a scoping stage, early evidence collection phase and late evidence collection phase (see Figure 1.1).

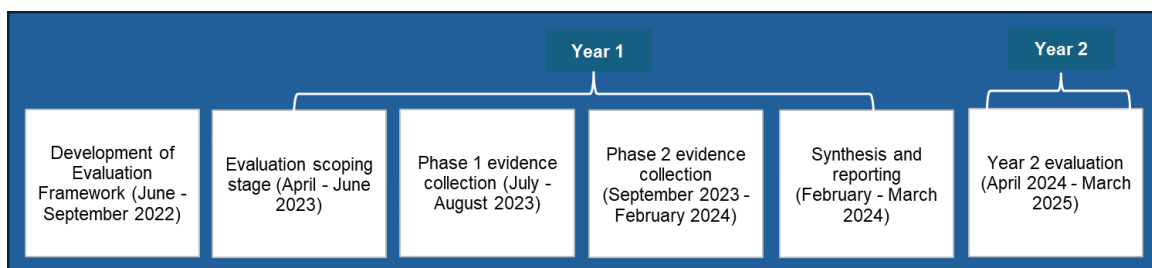


Fig. 1.1 – Timeline of the evaluation

Development of initial Evaluation Framework

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

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

First year of evaluation

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

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

A realist evaluation approach, where appropriate, was once again taken. The value of this approach is in developing understanding not only of the programme's successes and areas for improvement, but the driving forces behind the emerging outcomes and the processes through which improvements can be made. Further detail on the research approach is given in Annex 4.

The research findings presented in this first year final report build on the scoping report (submitted in July 2023) and interim report (September 2023), drawing from an extended pool of evidence provided by Natural England, Environment Agency, RBG Kew, Forestry Commission and partnership project organisations and collected by the ICF led team. Table 1.1 provides an overview of the evidence base for this report.

The Nature Returns programme is due to come to an end in March 2025, but the impacts and legacy of the programme are expected to continue for much longer (the habitats will be maintained for the next 10 years). As such, the findings and recommendations presented here represent a midway point in the overall evaluation, providing an indication of progress for the early stages of the programme.

Table 1.1 Evidence base

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workstream and pilot lead interviews (n=13) • Rapid assessment of programme monitoring data (n=450) 	Scoping report evidence base
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workstream team member interviews (n=19) • Survey completed by workstream and pilot teams (n=8) • Feedback questionnaire for webinar attendees (n=8) • Programme monitoring document analysis (n=83) 	Interim report evidence base
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot case studies (n=6) including interviews with 29 delivery team members, 6 land managers and 6 community workshops • Programme partner workshop with 11 partners • Interview with policy stakeholder (n=1) • Programme monitoring document analysis (n=23) 	Additional evidence for year 1 final report

In addition, the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (UK CEH) has analysed programme monitoring documents relating to monitoring metrics and methods across the partnership projects and workstreams 2 and 3 to explore whether the approaches to monitoring being taken fit with the programme's objectives, presented in the Annex 2.

A detailed description of the research methods and tools can also be found in the Annex 4.

Theory of change

Building on the initial TOC developed in 2022, refined over the course of the evaluation in collaboration with programme partners, a programme TOC has guided the development of evaluation questions and evidence collection. Modifications from the original TOC centre around:

- greater integration between workstreams leading to a single connected TOC,
- greater focus on wider stakeholder engagement alongside community involvement,
- adaptations to WS4 objectives as learning on the status and opportunities around blended finance, or lack thereof, came to light, and
- the importance of effective dissemination of programme outputs alongside their creation and development.

A simplified version is presented in Figure 1.2, which details how conditions or contexts (blue) set by the programme partners have led to change or mechanisms (green) in turn leading to short-term outcomes (yellow) and the long-term outcome (pink) to help meet

net zero and 25-Year Environment Plan targets. Factors in the TOC are divided into sub-sections related to the programme workstreams and intended outcomes, namely:

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

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

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

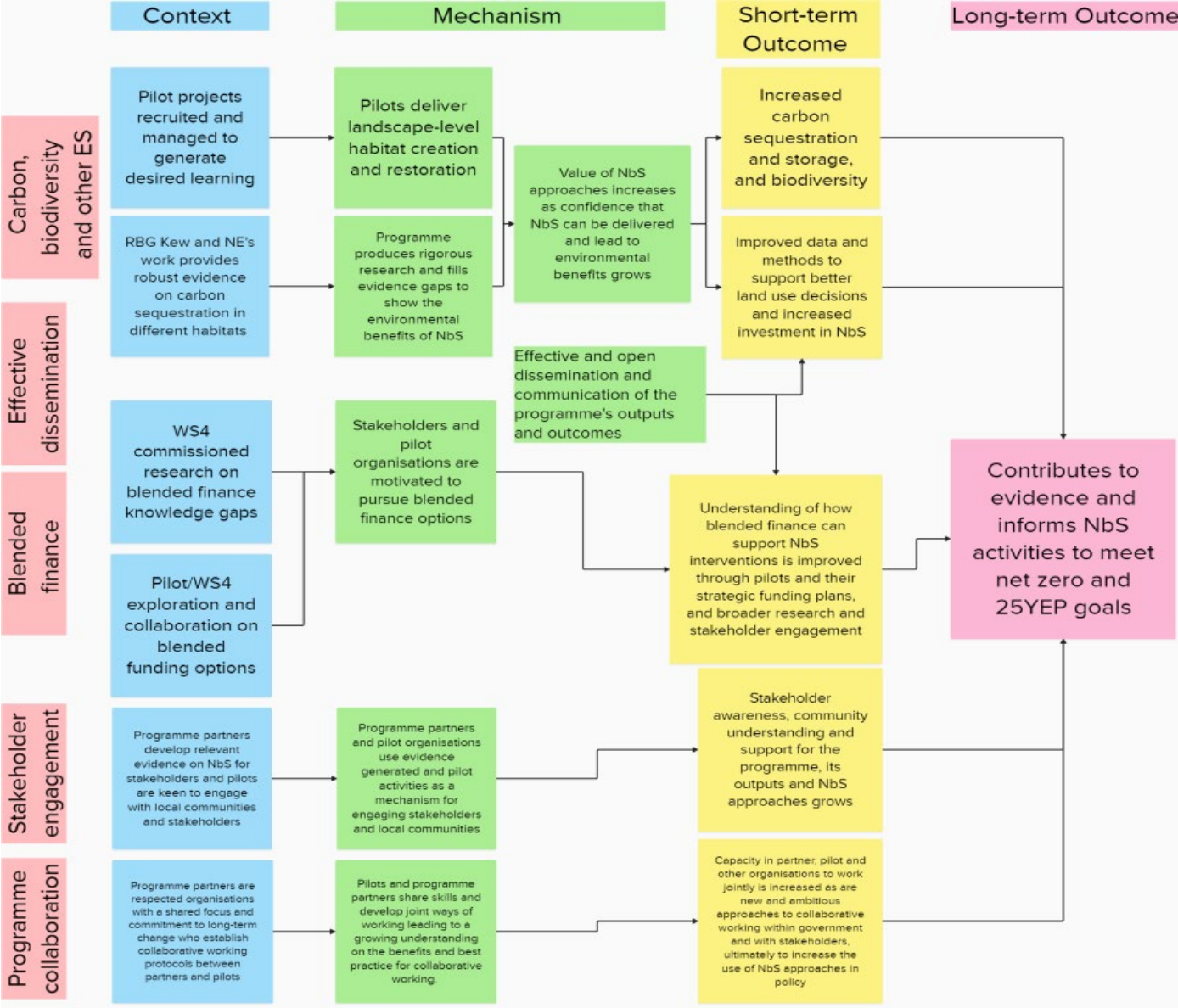


Fig. 1.2 – Simplified Theory of change for the Nature Returns programme (full TOC can be found in the Annex)

Limitations

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

- **Short initial evidence collection period.** Data collection in the initial phase of the evaluation was limited, due to NE reporting deadlines linked to the programme extension bid to Treasury, to a period of five weeks in July and August, a time when people typically take holidays. As such one potential interviewee was unable to participate and two potential respondents were unable to return the online survey. The short timescale also restricted the ability to challenge, test and confirm patterns, theories and outcomes by returning to interviewees and respondents with follow up questions. This was pursued in the later phase of evidence collection.
- **Restrictions on implementing a robust realist approach.** The focus of the evaluation at this stage was largely on emerging outcomes and internal processes. Without firm outcomes, the context and mechanisms driving outcome patterns, as explored through a realist approach, were not able to be investigated. As programme outputs and short-term outcomes emerge the evaluation will be able to explore these patterns in more depth although outcomes are not expected to be fully realised for some time yet. As a result, the TOC remains a working set of hypotheses and will be revised as the evaluation continues. Whilst the evaluation takes a realist inspired approach, we cannot be sure that our hypotheses will be confirmed until short-term and long-term outcomes are realised.
- **Missed opportunities to collect feedback.** Where there was opportunity, for example, the partnership project forums or WS4 webinars, effort has been made to collect evidence and feedback from participants. This was not possible for all events and opportunities due to the short timescales. Collaborative planning between ICF and partners to explore future events for the next year will help to clarify opportunities for evidence collection for the next phase.
- **Limited wider engagement and challenge.** The evidence is largely based on internal documentation and interviews and as such lacks external perspective and challenge, particularly from those who are impacted by the programme. This was explored to some degree through community workshops in the partnership project sites, but broader policy maker engagement was not possible due to limited responses from policy stakeholders. Getting greater engagement from a wider policy and science audience will be an initial focus for the next year of evidence collection to triangulate and improve robustness of evaluation findings.

Report structure

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

Sections 2 to 5 synthesise evidence collected and present the findings from the first year of evaluation. The sections relate to each TOC theme and evaluation questions. Each section includes an assessment of the extent to which the evaluation questions can be answered and the strength of evidence for the findings presented, as set out in Annex 3. Key findings, recommendations for the programme and next steps for the evaluation are also presented.

Section 6 explores how outcomes and progress are being captured and monitored as part of the programme.

Section 7 presents overall conclusions and initial plans for the next year of the evaluation.

2. Carbon, biodiversity and other ecosystem services

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

Guiding evaluation questions
<p>Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent, how and in what circumstances have partnership projects achieved the proposed habitat changes? What are the expected carbon storage and sequestration, biodiversity and other environmental outcomes of the programme in different locations and habitats? To what extent and how have the scientific objectives of the partnership projects and programme been achieved? To what extent, why and how have the activities in WS2 and 3 led to data collection on carbon storage and sequestration? Did their activities go to plan? Was data collection possible along the desired timeline? Did the resolution and methods of the sampling meet the goals of the research? <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What short-term impacts have resulted from the habitat creation and restoration created by the partnership projects? Who has benefitted from this? What short-term impacts has the carbon science from WS2 and 3 had? Who has benefitted from this? What scientific methods/tools/protocols have been developed, and which are scalable / applicable in different contexts and timescales?
Extent to which evaluation questions can be answered
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The evidence base is still in development and so questions are answered in terms of the programme's current and potential to add to the evidence base. There is a high degree of confidence that the evaluation questions for the partnership project's progress toward habitat changes as well as perceived short-term impacts and anticipated long-term impacts have been answered. Scientific elements of the programme are still in process and only progress to date and intended outputs in the short-term can be considered. Impact evaluation questions are largely out of scope for the evaluation at present. Questions relating to the data collection activities of WS2 and 3 are in part answered in a review of the effectiveness, scalability and applicability of scientific methods and protocols conducted by UK CEH.
Strength of evidence <i>(for the findings presented)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence is not sufficient to answer all of the evaluation questions fully, but the findings are generally consistent across different respondents and methodologies providing confidence in the findings. Findings reported are largely supported by two or more sources, particularly around the progress made, potential impacts and challenges involved in habitat works, Evidence base is supported by findings from UK CEH on scientific data collection. There is less consensus on the outputs and challenges to scientific data collection perhaps due to the smaller teams involved in this area.
Research tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviews with workstream teams and programme partners (n=32) Programme monitoring data analysis (n=556) Survey (n=8) Partnership project case studies (n=6) Programme partner workshop (n=1)

Key findings

- Partnership projects are on track to meet their habitat restoration and creation objectives in the face of several sources of delay and challenge, albeit with some amendments to their initial goals.
- Impacts, largely visual landscape change, are already being seen and are expected to bring benefits for nature, local communities and land managers.
- Increasing knowledge and data on carbon storage, sequestration and gas flux in a variety of well and poorly evidenced habitats is seen as a major benefit of the Nature Returns programme.
- Data collection in WS2 and 3 is thought to have been rigorous and robust and likely to meet the research objectives of the programme. Widening of the scope of sites and extended data collection periods have resulted from delays to the programme and other challenges.
- Contributions to existing data, the development of standardised and novel methodologies, and application of data to a Landscape Modelling and Mapping tool mean the evidence collected has the potential to have impact beyond the programme, for example informing carbon data for offsetting and carbon markets.
- Data collection objectives set at the beginning of the programme are expected to be met. Science workstreams have had some interaction with the partnership projects, which could be enhanced through the incorporation of data collected at partnership project sites into analysis and modelling work. This would enable development of tools useful to a wider audience.
- There is currently no secured public funding in place to continue monitoring beyond the period of the programme, limiting the collection of meaningful evidence on how carbon accumulates in diverse habitats over time, although a series of chronosequence sites are giving new data on this topic and provision has been made to allow access to partnership project sites for monitoring over a ten-year period.

2.1 To what extent, how and in what circumstances have partnership projects achieved the proposed habitat changes?

Across all six partnership projects, planned habitat creation and restoration works are set to be achieved by March 2024 (see table 2.1), with some amendments to proposed works set out in the initial bids. These include:

- Wild Exmoor: There was a delay in creating the 23.86 ha of heathland whilst key stakeholders came to a consensus on the approach to creation and management of heathland. This was particularly important in identifying the best way to manage waxcap grassland fungi.
- Derwent Valley: The original bid included 0.5ha of orchard creation at Allestree Park, however this habitat work has been removed due to public opposition regarding a lack of a management plan for the proposed orchard. Once again it is hoped that this work can be carried out at a later stage once a management plan has been put together and funded.

- Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire Freshwater Network: due to landowners pulling out of the project, two sites totalling 48.3ha had to be removed (discussed in more detail below).
- Plymouth Natural Grid: The partnership project initially included 0.26 ha of salt marsh restoration at the Efford Marsh site. Due to perceived challenges with monitoring in this area, the work has been postponed to the next funding period.

Table 2.1 - Habitat creation targets and progress as of December 2023

Habitat type	Target (hectares)	Progress to date (Feb 2024, as per latest report)	Percentage progress
Wood pasture	179.81	71.59	39.81%
Broadleaf woodland	35.14	29.69	84.49%
Mature deciduous woodland	77.93	0	0%
Traditional orchards	6.8	6.88	100%+
Species-rich grassland	111.71	35.04	31.37%
Floodplain mosaic	39.62	29.64	74.81%
Mixed native woodland	1.31	0	0%
Peaty pockets	74	55	74.32%
Wetland	4.82	0	0%
Fens	8.47	8.47	100%
Saltmarsh	0.26	0	0%
Scrub	0.26	0.26	100%
Semi-natural grassland	1.47	1.47	100%
Pond	33.54	23.2	69.17%
Total	575.13	261.24	45.42%
Hedgerow	4.1km	0.95km	23.17%

N.B. Projects are only reporting progress when all tasks relating to the habitat works are completed.

N.B. Amounts do not include natural regeneration and management of existing habitats.

N.B. Derbyshire Wildlife Trust (DWT), as of December 2023, had not reported amounts but state they are on track to meet targets.

Challenges, explored through the case studies, faced by the partnership projects in undertaking and completing habitat restoration and creation works centred around:

Short timescales and programme delays

Delays in issuing project contracts have meant that delivery has had to occur over shorter timescales. Delays are said to be particularly difficult since the project activities are highly seasonal. As a result, timing of delivery had to be reassessed, certain activities had to be undertaken in sub-optimal conditions and teams were unable or had to postpone baseline surveys, in turn delaying habitat works. Members of one project team highlighted that the one-year timeline for the project gave little flexibility to allow for unanticipated delays. In addition, short timescales in applying and delivering the project were said to impact the ability of teams to effectively plan and develop the project. One team stated that they would have liked to have time to consult with local communities and farmers on the best area to conduct activities, taking into account valuable arable and productive farmland.

Season- and weather-dependent nature of the work

The unpredictability of the weather and the seasonality of work means work is not uniform over the year and this was said to make it difficult to know how many people to hire. For some partnership projects, there was a tendency to hire fewer staff, which often led to the project teams feeling overworked and overwhelmed. An increased use of contractors, factored into the budget, was suggested to help overcome this issue. A key issue noted by the one project team, however, was the limited supply and availability of local contractors for various works such as fencing, hedge laying and tree planting. To ensure capacity to deliver these projects in the future, setting up apprenticeships was suggested by one land manager. In addition, flooding and poor weather hampered several project's works. Despite these challenges, the weather was not said to have prevented the teams from completing the proposed works. Given the weather dependencies and seasonal nature of the habitat works, several project team members and programme partners believed completion of works should be decoupled from funding timelines and flexibility built into project planning.

Rigid approach to habitat restoration and management

One project team were unable to come to an agreement with NE about how habitat should be created and managed. The team felt there should be more flexibility to pursue approaches they deemed to be beneficial to multiple species. They commented that there was space for Natural England to reconsider the structures in place for their protected sites and standardised approaches to how they should be managed to be more responsive to environmental needs.

Land available for habitat creation and restoration is subject to landowner engagement

For one project the quick application timeframe contributed to initial landowner engagement being rushed and a subsequent lack of security in agreements with landowners consenting to being part of the project. Two landowners withdrew due to, in one instance, a lack of internal resource and capacity to support the project, and in the other, a perceived lack of financial incentive to change their current land-use. The loss of these landowners changed the overall habitat restoration and creation area considerably, from the proposed 81.8 ha to 33.5 ha. The funds allocated to the cancelled sites were reprofiled to allow more work to be carried out in another area and re-allocated to allow for more monitoring.

Delays due to planning permission, EIA and funding agreements

Habitats requiring full planning permission posed a challenge, particularly for team members who had not experienced this process before. Receiving the complete set of planning permissions involved knowledge of different permissions and their requirements. Elsewhere, tree planting was delayed due to waiting for a EWCO grant funding

agreement, a particular issue due to the limited tree planting seasons within the contract delivery period. For another project, lengthy EIA scoping processes with the Forestry Commission ahead of woodland works was an unforeseen barrier to beginning habitat creation works.

2.2. What short-term impacts have resulted from the habitat creation and restoration created by the partnership projects? Who has benefitted from this?

For all the partnership projects it is too early to see measurable impact to carbon sequestration and biodiversity improvements. However, landscapes are visually and physically changing to some extent with:

- the establishment of a taller average grass height in grassland and associated species,
- thousands of young trees and km's of hedgerows planted,
- species such as lapwings were anecdotally said by one project team member, to be returning to habitats, and
- alterations to the flow of a water course in terms of direction and volume.

The outcomes for Natural Flood Management (NFM) were often the most notable for the partnership projects so far. In Plymouth, Exeter University have conducted a study on the effectiveness of the leaky dams installed and the recent release of beavers in the area and found that the peak flow rates have already been dramatically reduced.

“There’s a statistical significance from having those structures in place, [they’re] affecting volume... there is housing at the bottom the stream which is susceptible to flooding, so that will then help alleviate those flood impacts.” – Project team interviewee (reflecting on a study conducted by the University of Exeter)

The Freshwater Habitats Trust (FHT) team commented that the changes to the physical environment are stark. Notably, the floodplain creation work has had a very visual impact on the landscape. Prior to the project work, the site was a grassland, and now there are sizable ponds where water from nearby flooding can sit. In Wansbeck, early impacts include soils being protected from poaching and erosion by new fenced areas as well as scrapes created holding water in heavy rain and flood events of December 2023.

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

In addition, partnership projects reported that there had been initial outcomes for learning across their teams. Derbyshire Wildlife Trust and Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust described their increased understanding across the team on topics such as local NFM potential and flood risk, the willow tit life history, how different grazing management can affect different sites, and orchard planting. Plymouth Natural Grid shared that their team had learned through trial and error how to greatly increase their efficiency for installing leaky woody dams. The ability to be adaptive and solve these initial challenges was viewed as a success for the collaboration and skills development for the team.

2.3. What are the expected carbon storage and sequestration, biodiversity and other environmental outcomes of the programme in different locations and habitats? And who will benefit?

Expected future impacts were discussed with project teams and local communities and included:

- Increases in the biodiversity value of the landscape, including soil health and abundance of bird, aquatic, and invertebrate species, including native pollinators.
- Increased carbon storage.
- Slowing of the flow of watercourses and rivers, holding back flood water when required and reducing peak flow during flood events.
- Tree and hedge planting will provide shelter for livestock, shaded areas along the river and wildlife corridors while cutting back of scrub will likely create temporary benefits by providing open areas in the summer to benefit invertebrates, as they will have more basking opportunities.
- Animals able to roam over larger areas leading to structural landscape ecological change. Pigs, in Wild Exmoor, are expected to structurally change the ground, creating pockets that capture surface water and slowing water flow.
- In Wild Exmoor, initial interventions of the project will give way to natural management of the landscape and reduce the need for human intervention.
- Habitat works will contribute to the medium-term goal of delivering 10,000ha of landscape restoration, and add to the pipeline of works to deliver a further 20,000ha by 2050 in the Derwent Forest Landscape Recovery Project.
- More productive land – orchards planted on the Hasfield Estate in Gloucestershire will produce substantial amounts of fruit in approximately 15 years.
- Better public access and more opportunities for the public to engage with the landscape.

As the evidence base grows for these projects, landowners will be able to use their networks to promote the work and show other landowners what can be achieved and how NbS can be used as an income stream.

While the beneficiaries of these changes were largely thought to be nature, local communities were perceived to benefit, particularly where flood risk was reduced as a result of project work. The resulting carbon sequestration from projects was also highlighted as a key benefit for communities and nature due to wider long-term benefits from climate change mitigation. For the Severn Solutions project, the estate owners were also identified as major beneficiaries, in terms of their economic security and changes to their business model becoming more in line with an environmentally driven ethos. Landowners were also thought could benefit from being early adopters of nature-based solutions and/or environmental farming methods that will position them for future opportunities such as engaging with carbon finance, biodiversity net gain (BNG), or agri-environment schemes.

There were some negative environmental impacts of the work discussed, for example, carbon emissions associated with the sourcing of timber for fencing and guards, transporting of mulch into the landscape and the use of chemicals to clear areas ahead of habitat creation. The need to consider these costs in any carbon and biodiversity accounting was raised.

2.4. To what extent and how have the scientific objectives of the partnership projects and programme been achieved?

A significant outcome of the programme, as mentioned by programme partners in interviews, is the collection and accumulation of good quality data on carbon storage and sequestration and greenhouse gas fluxes across different habitats. Workstreams 2 (WS2) and 3 (WS3) play vital roles in filling evidence gaps and building understanding of carbon storage and sequestration in natural and semi-natural habitats, and the links to biodiversity. Filling such gaps is, believed by several interviewees across workstreams, to be a necessary priority for investment to achieve climate mitigation goals and innovative carbon management whilst ensuring the right habitats are being created or restored in the right places.

Programme team members shared that the work done by WS2 and WS3 has surpassed initial objectives, evident in instances such as WS2's collection of soil samples from areas beyond the designated partnership projects. This success is attributed to streamlined processes that have accelerated various tasks, including sampling, DNA extraction, and the assessment of underground plant and fungal diversity.

The rest of this section outlines how the Nature Returns programme is collecting data on carbon and sequestration, filling gaps for habitats for which there is little evidence, and standardising methodologies for collecting data.

2.5. To what extent, why and how have the activities in WS2 and 3 led to data collection on carbon storage and sequestration?

Workstreams 2 and 3 are engaged in the scientific study of how carbon and biodiversity change as a result of habitat restoration and creation. Table 2.2 shows the data each workstream is collecting for different ecosystems.

Table 2.2 – Data collected by workstream, ecosystem and location

Workstream	Data type	Ecosystems	Location
WS2	Soil carbon stock assessment	Semi-natural woodlands Species-rich grasslands Scrub and hedgerows Floodplain mosaic Small peatland areas	Six partnership project sites Five Chronosequence sites spread across England
WS2	Vegetation species identification and biodiversity assessment	Semi-natural woodlands Species-rich grasslands Scrub and hedgerows Floodplain mosaic Small peatland areas	Six partnership project sites Five Chronosequence sites spread across England
WS2	Vegetation structural complexity	Semi-natural woodlands Species-rich grasslands Scrub and hedgerows	Six partnership project sites Five Chronosequence

Workstream	Data type	Ecosystems	Location
		Floodplain mosaic Small peatland areas	sites spread across England
WS2	Carbon dioxide and methane flux Carbon stock assessment	Semi-natural woodlands Species-rich grasslands Scrub and hedgerows Floodplain mosaic Small peatland areas	Six partnership project sites Five Chronosequence sites spread across England
WS2	Carbon dioxide and methane flux Carbon stock assessment	Hedgerow and scrub (with WS3)	Six partnership project sites Five Chronosequence sites spread across England
WS2	Carbon dioxide and methane flux Carbon stock assessment	Trees	Six partnership project sites Five Chronosequence sites spread across England
WS3	Belowground soil carbon and fungal community composition (in soil and roots)	Broadleaf, mixed, conifer and wet woodland Meadow Scrub and hedgerows Un-improved grasslands Arboretum Horticulture bed Silvopasture and pasture Redwood and large trees	Across four main habitats at Wakehurst
WS3	Soil carbon stock	Broadleaf, mixed, conifer and wet woodland Meadow Scrub and hedgerows Un-improved grasslands Arboretum Horticulture bed Silvopasture and pasture Redwood and large trees	Across four main habitats at Wakehurst
WS3	Greenhouse gas (CO ₂) flux	Broadleaf, mixed, conifer and wet woodland Meadow Scrub and hedgerows Un-improved grasslands Arboretum	Across four main habitats at Wakehurst

Workstream	Data type	Ecosystems	Location
		Horticulture bed Silvopasture and pasture Redwood and large trees	
WS3	Aboveground biomass, biodiversity, structure and composition	Broadleaf, mixed, conifer and wet woodland Meadow Scrub and hedgerows Un-improved grasslands Arboretum Horticulture bed Silvopasture and pasture Redwood and large trees	Across four main habitats at Wakehurst

Initial interviewees with WS members highlighted the exploration of carbon stores in previously unstudied habitats as a success of the programme, providing investigation into how carbon differs between these habitats and between habitats of different ages. Team members from WS3 identified that knowing the carbon amounts in different habitats has the potential to ensure accurate calculations for carbon offsetting or planting schemes.

In the near term, a report is due on the build-up of carbon over time in grasslands, which will add to this growing evidence base. Additionally, WS2 and WS3 were said to be filling in the gaps in knowledge of how fungi interact below ground and impact carbon sequestration. Evidence on fungi, provided by the programme, has been included in the Natural Capital Ecosystem Assessment and data is also expected to contribute to Defra's new Nature investment standards. The Nature Returns programme team will be issuing an interim report in May 2024 to provide information and insights across the programme. The launch of the report will be followed by bespoke webinars.

The funding was said, by one WS3 interviewee, to have allowed the team to pursue a rigorous, high-resolution approach to data collection. This was supported by a WS2 member who noted funds are sufficient for now but would need to continue into the future to extend monitoring efforts and create continuous data sets. Whilst these intended outcomes are still being delivered, UK CEH analysis of the data collection for WS2 suggest the data collection is robust and is likely to meet the research objectives (see section 6.1 for a summary of the report and Annex 2 for details of the full report).

2.6. What scientific methods/tools/protocols have been developed, and which are scalable / applicable in different contexts and timescales?

The two workstreams are working together to standardise some of their methodologies so that the data is comparable and contextualised. WS2 and WS3 are motivated to standardise their methodologies as they emphasised that there is often a limited evidence bank around carbon, and where the evidence is available, it is often generated using different methodologies, producing data that is not comparable or consistent. The methods and evidence are intended to be open access and it is hoped that these resources will be used as tools by other organisations.

“what we're doing is trying to put in methodology so [data collection is] better standardised, it's faster and we get results that are comparable and useful.” – WS3 interviewee

WS2 and 3 are collecting above ground, below ground and gas flux data over space, time and across the seasons to understand the natural variability of carbon within a habitat and ecosystem (see table 2.2). One respondent noted that the combination of RBG Kew's in-depth science with Natural England's large-scale surveying techniques has helped both parties understand what compromises can and can't be made in the short duration of the programme. As well as standardising data collection, the two workstreams are working together to develop methods for habitats for which there is poor data, as discussed above, for example their collaboration on using LiDAR to measure carbon in hedgerows and scrub. There are plans to submit a paper on the LiDAR methodology to an academic journal in the next stage of the programme, a draft of this paper has already been produced. Respondents from WS3 believed these methodological advances and standardisation would be able to be used by researchers and academics outside of the programme and to this end WS3 have produced instruction books where novel methods or technology are used in their work.

Landscape Mapping and Modelling Tool

The Landscape Mapping and Modelling Tool, which is being developed by a team at the University of Sussex and Birkbeck University is expected to showcase and analyse the emerging scientific data coming out of WS3. One of the aims for the tool is to help the decision-making process around priorities for land use management across landscapes, helping to set incentives based on carbon estimates in specific habitats. The tool is designed to be flexible to complement other modelling work and data sets outside of the Nature Returns programme and to highlight the uncertainties and gaps that exist in the data. Programme documents show opportunities for the Landscape Modelling and Mapping Tool to merge with other tools and data sets to improve the accuracy of outputs. Other potential data sets include Natural England's carbon data, open access data from Living England from national carbon auditing, the Trees outside of Woodland project from Forestry Research and Oxford University's Agile Initiative data.

Programme documents show that the Landscape Mapping and Modelling Tool has continued to develop and now includes census data and other socio-economic data as inputs so as to ground carbon data in local context. Incorporating these datasets will allow for place-based thinking, through highlighting the overlap of social and ecological issues and/or opportunities. Programme documents show that some concerns were raised by WS3 around highly variable modelling tool observations caused by a lack of density in the data collected at the Wakehurst site as well as a need for ground truthing of the to account for gaps. With additional time, WS3 could also engage with at least one partnership project site to understand context and ways in which the Landscape Modelling and Mapping tool can be useful to real life landscape-scale planning. This engagement has been hampered not just by time constraints but also by a limited knowledge of what data the partnership projects are collecting as well as the small team, and limited capacity, at UoS and Birkbeck.

Efforts have begun to try and link the Landscape Modelling and Mapping Tool with Defra's Land Use Framework. A meeting between the University of Sussex and Defra's Land use Framework Planning team has taken place but further engagement may be useful to understand how the Landscape Mapping and Modelling Tool can be of use to policymakers and that there aren't duplications of effort. At present the tool is being developed to be used by researchers in conversation with policymakers but the overall aim would be to make it as accessible as possible to a wider group of users. It will be important going forwards to think about the tool as an output in its own right that will have

a life beyond the programme. To date it has been embedded in WS3 but in communicating the outputs of the programme it could perhaps be supported as something that has application wider than the programme.

2.7. Did their activities go to plan? Was data collection possible along the desired timeline? Did the resolution and methods of the sampling meet the goals of the research?

Data collection has been somewhat hampered by wider delays experienced by the programme. WS2 have collected data at all the partnership project sites but were delayed in collecting baseline data due to later partnership project start dates and the seasonality of monitoring data collection. This has meant that baseline data was not collected in its entirety before habitat works were underway and may impact whether conclusions can be drawn as to how habitat restoration and creation works lead to changes in the amount of carbon stored. WS1 and 2 interviewees reflected that the WS2 field team were working at capacity for much of the work to try to make up for lost time. Programme documents show that the delay in funding also impacted WS3 as it reduced the scientific research period to two years instead of the original two and a half years and delayed production of final contracts for WS3 partners. The delay has implications for how the team will produce impactful results. WS2 and WS3 shared that they felt even two and a half years would have been insufficient and would much prefer the data to be collected and analysed over 10+ years, to be sure of conclusions drawn for carbon science. Additionally, WS3 are also constrained by seasonality of data collection and WS3 members are conscious of working within the seasons to deliver the most reproducible and scalable methods and results.

The adaptability of the programme and partners to overcome challenges associated with delays was highlighted as a positive by several interviewees from WS1 and 2. For instance, WS2 members were able to utilise time during delays to identify and increase the number of chrono-sequence sites (habitats of different ages) outside of the partnership project areas. Their inclusion has led to a more diverse habitat sample across the country and better representation of sites for data collection under WS2.

2.8. What short-term impacts has the carbon science from WS2 and 3 had? Who has benefitted from this?

In general, WS2 and WS3 partners have shared that more time is needed to draw meaningful conclusions from carbon science data. There are significant temporal and spatial variations in carbon data across project sites which has complicated the interpretation of results up to this point. Therefore, WS2 and WS3 are cautious about prematurely presenting results, opting to wait for the upcoming programme extension to do a thorough round of data analysis and synthesis of findings.

There are some short-term impacts that have benefitted local partners. The programme team have acknowledged that there is utility in the visualisations and maps in helping partners to communicate complex findings to stakeholders. In the programme partner workshop, programme leads shared that local partners have appreciated the work that has been done to highlight carbon benefits on agricultural sites. Specifically, wood pasture creation and chrono-sequences were seen as valuable approaches to provide dual benefits to farming practices and carbon management. WS2 have also mentioned that a benefit of their approach to the carbon science work has been the upskilling of

team members and fostered partnerships, positioning the team to explore new markets and avenues for collaboration.

Outside of these initial impacts, programme partners do have wider objectives for how carbon science done by WS2 and WS3 will play into the national agenda for nature-based solutions. Interviewees from WS2 and 3 reported that the evidence they are building has the potential to positively impact progress towards the UK's net zero and carbon policies/commitments. Further, the data from WS2 and 3 is intended to be used to update Natural England's Carbon Storage and Sequestration by Habitat report and will have potential for publication. Several papers are expected to be submitted to scientific journals over the next year. WS members stated that with this knowledge base, the programme partners will be able to provide advice on the science that informs green finance best practice.

Recommendations

For programme partners

- Identify, as data collection and analysis come to completion, the range of databases, tools, and stakeholders that evidence may be of use to and ensure data is in a format that is useable and accessible to interested parties.
- Integrate WS 2, 3 and partnership project data into the Landscape Modelling and Mapping tool and other models and tools that the programme is working with.
- Develop an output that brings together the data and knowledge from the partnership projects and WS2 and 3, that is relevant to WS4.
- When calculating the benefits and impacts, take into account the costs and disbenefits that may be involved in creating, restoring and maintaining habitat.
- Explore how data could be collected from partnership project and other sites over a longer timescale (10+ years) so as to evidence the impact of habitat creation and restoration.
- Create a central hub for sharing methods, research and data between the workstream and partnership project organisations, that can continue longer term, for the period under which partnership project habitats will be managed.
- Ensure data formatting, collation and analysis are done in time to allow for their dissemination, promotion and use by other workstreams and external stakeholders.
- Communicate, more broadly, the challenges of practical habitat creation and restoration and how they may be overcome in future NbS projects.

For partnership project teams

- It has been difficult to meet the expectations of project timelines. It may be useful to spend time at the onset of the extension year to develop realistic timeframes for the tasks ahead.
- Build in contractor/consultant costs into proposals to allow work to be delivered more flexibly.
- Difficulties agreeing habitat management approaches and the need to learn how to carry out habitat creation activities that are new to the delivery organisation have led to delays to project activities. Teams should seek expertise from within NE or through external organisations at the planning stage on how to effectively conduct novel habitat creation activities proposed.
- Explore, with the funder, the best balance between habitat creation, monitoring and communication and engagement work so as to better understand how to prioritise project internal resources.

- Build flexibility into proposals and projects, where possible, to allow for delays relating to, for example, weather, changes in supply of materials and availability of contractors, and lengthy planning administrative processes.
- Foster a learning environment within and between partnership project teams to allow for adaptive management of issues.

For programme sponsors and funders

- Decouple NbS and nature recovery project funding from habitat creation and restoration completion dates to account for the seasonality and unpredictability of habitat works including more long-term funding arrangements that can cross financial years and greater flexibility in funding to allow for unforeseen circumstances.
- Design funding vehicles to allow for longer project development and planning phases including time for greater consultation with communities, involvement of experts and discussions with funders about grant requirements.

Next steps for the evaluation

- Explore how data and outputs created are accessed and used by stakeholders external to the programme, and whether this leads to any changes in the way carbon is measured and accounted for.
- Assess the progress and use of the Landscape modelling tool and investigate how visualisations and initial findings from WS2 and WS3 have been shared with and used by stakeholders.
- Evaluate the collaboration between WS2, WS3, and WS4 to understand the strides made in including carbon science with blended finance and governance research.
- Explore how partnership projects can build on progress so far and if the learning generated from implementing NbS approaches has led to any changes for the next funded period.

3. Blended finance

This section explores how the evidence and on both blended finance and governance as it relates to nature-based solutions are being improved through the programme. An enhanced knowledge base is expected to help grow funding for ecosystem services and aid the practical delivery and implementation of NbS projects in the future.

Guiding evaluation questions
Process <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How well have the project partners engaged private investors in the work? What approaches worked for whom, and why? To what extent, how and in what circumstances have delivery organisations involved in the programme increased their understanding of (and capability in) blended finance? Impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent has the evidence generated by WS4 enabled the partnership projects to develop strategic funding plans? How are these going to be implemented?
Extent to which evaluation questions can be answered
Workstream activities can be described with some inclusion of views from workstream team members and activity participants. There is some consideration of impacts of WS4 work, particularly on the partnership projects.
Strength of evidence <i>(for the findings presented)</i>
Strength of evidence and consistency are medium – the evidence base will be developed in the subsequent phase of the evaluation. Where some activities of the workstream are presented, strength will be increased in the next phase when experiences and views of the impact of the activities can be explored more.
Research tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Programme monitoring data (n=113) Interviews with workstream teams (n=7) Interviews with project teams (n=29) Programme workshop findings (n=1) Ad hoc conversations with workstream lead

Key findings

- Commissioned research on blended finance and governance has added to the knowledge base and workstream partners report an increase in their understanding of these topics and of their importance to the work on carbon science.
- Increasing understanding of blended finance and governance in terms of how it leads to practical action has been slower than anticipated.
- WS4 are engaging with investors in a number of ways to both share learning and gain further understanding of investor perspectives. Continual engagement over the long-term has been found to be needed to share knowledge and create effective blended finance partnerships.

- Partnership projects are at varying stages of developing plans to pursue blended finance, with some focusing on developing partnership working and others striving to develop more of a strategic plan.
- The work of the Forestry Commission on carbon pricing research, green finance and the implication for land is well developed and integrated with WS4. This is expected to improve understanding of revenue generation opportunities, increase investor confidence and increase transparency in the UK Voluntary Carbon Market.

3.1. How well have the project partners engaged private investors in the work? What approaches worked for whom, and why?

The EA and FC have engaged with private investors in a number of ways within WS4. These include:

- Roundtables (Aggregation and investment for nature) and conversations with individual investors,
- Webinars following the Governance of blended finance report and Aggregation of ecosystem suppliers report,
- Attendance at the Nature Finance 2023 conference,
- Engagement with local partners and stakeholders through the partnership project sprint sessions (further details below).

Feedback from interviewees suggest there is a need for a central repository for data and research relating to blended finance. This would help interested individuals to see what research is already available and where the information gaps still exist. It would also potentially increase uptake of blended finance approaches. Feedback from EA's two webinars can be found in section 5.

Policy and investor landscape

At the programme design and initiation phase, there were expectations that the UK and global environmental markets and policy landscape would develop more than it has. For example, it was expected that there would be more finalised and operational carbon codes, that the Land Use Framework would be published during the first year of the Nature Returns Programme, and that other standards governing nature markets would be developed. Instead, the UK government has focused efforts on working with the British Standards Institute to establish the Nature Investment Standards Programme. This difference in progress has contributed to the wider economy being less adoptive of blended finance than hoped. In general, confidence of investors in blended finance was said by partners to be lower than expected. As a result, WS4 have focused more on commissioning research than originally envisaged and are making (or have made) significant efforts to engage with stakeholders and share findings.

Workstream interviewees shared that it is not clear as to how investors will generate income from the partnership projects and a report from North Star Transitions (Aggregation and Investment for Nature) concludes that there is still much work that is needed to be done to develop markets for nature-based activities and that investors are hesitant. A roundtable involving large-scale investors preceding the report, led to discussion on the difficulties in furthering progress. It was raised that investors want something they understand and something that looks like a typical investment vehicle where they loan capital and can expect a set return on investment – environmental goods

markets were said in the roundtable to not yet developed enough to provide this. It was also felt that more could be done to prepare landholders and nature organisations for the transition away from full reliance on government grants and subsidies and enable them to engage in the private market effectively.

It is expected that engagement with investors will continue and develop in the next phase of the programme. Programme documents show that collaboration with North Star Transitions has already continued with discussions around understanding investor motivations and co-creation of a financial product to support landscape-scale land use change.

3.2. To what extent, how and in what circumstances have delivery organisations involved in the programme increased their understanding of (and capability in) blended finance?

An improved understanding of blended finance and effective governance under WS4, driven by the Environment Agency and Forestry Commission has, to date, largely been accomplished through commissioned research reports and webinars and mostly unstructured engagement with several of the partnership projects. Commissioned research included:

- Governance of blended finance report (complete with supporting webinar), which examines the governance structures and legal forms available to entities seeking to deliver NbS, and the ability of different structures to blend funding from several sources.
- Aggregation of ecosystem suppliers report (complete with supporting webinar), which explores the benefits and drawbacks of different models currently in place for aggregating ecosystem service sellers.
- Flood, water, land governance report (complete), which provides an independent view, through a roadmap, on how to achieve integrated land and water governance and attract more private investment. This has been shared with Defra colleagues in their development of the Catchment Action Plan, and with Defra's Green Finance Team.
- Land use decisions research and guidance (complete and work extending on the Land use change tool discussed in this research), which provides a summary of the key decision-making stages during a landscape restoration project and suggested tools available to support those decisions.
- Buyers of ecosystem services research which involved collaboration with Defra Nature Markets team (ongoing with outputs expected in the near-term). A webinar to share findings from the buyers research has been scheduled for 25th April 2024.
- UK Carbon pricing research on a methodology by which carbon prices can be regularly collated and published for the UK Voluntary Carbon Market (complete but yet to be published) (Forestry Commission have been leading this work)
- Codes and Standards development: Research on elements of the Woodland Water Code Plus and the Agroforestry Code (ongoing). A report from the James Hutton Institute on the Woodland Water Code will be shared in the near-term. (Forestry Commission have been leading this work).

Programme documents indicate additional reports on Green Finance and Aggregation of Investors (contracted to North Star Transitions) are completed with North Star Transitions sharing their most recent report on 25 March 2024.

Forestry Commission

The Forestry Commission has been utilising their unique partnerships to create resources pertaining to green or blended finance for the Nature Returns programme. An FC interviewee stated that they are working with Ecosystem Marketplace, a US based company that is looking at carbon pricing analytics. This information is intended to guide UK based carbon pricing research (listed above) where there was said to be a lack of relevant data. FC shared that they are working with Scottish Forestry and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to share updates on the Peatland Code and Woodland Carbon Code unit transaction prices and differentials. The findings will be shared with the Nature Returns steering group and published via Ecosystem Marketplace's 'State of the Carbon Market' reports. Additionally, the Forestry Commission are working with the Land App, a web-based calculator, to enable land managers to better understand the benefits of green or blended finance. The Land App, which is linked FC's work developing the England Woodland Creation offer (EWCO), aims to highlight what opportunities are available to farmers and land managers looking to diversify their income.

A learning matrix has been developed to help pull together learning across various programmes, especially between the Nature Returns programme and Nature Environment Investment Readiness Fund (NEIRF). The matrix is intended to synthesise programme learning's on various themes of blended finance and ecosystem services including flood management, biodiversity and well-being, among others. Earlier in the evaluation, a member of Forestry Commission reported that the matrix successfully captures and summarises the information that has been generated through programme meetings. However, a concern has been raised around resource availability at NEIRF impacting the ability to regularly identify and share learning. To date, the learning matrix is said to be internal to the EA and is still under development.

Effective collaboration and engagement

A key learning from WS4 is the necessity for several interactions with investors and partners to achieve any action on blended finance. WS4 have found through the commissioned research and interaction with stakeholders that engaging on a meaningful level requires continual engagement over a long period of time and development of trusting relationships to build confidence and knowledge within all partners. This learning point is one which WS4 will aim to emphasise within government to ensure true appreciation of what is required to ensure blended finance partnerships can be successful. This learning has shaped the WS4 sprint sessions completed with some of the partnership projects detailed in the partnership project engagement section below. Because of the early development stage of nature markets (in terms of policy, but also because there are few examples), every example of an organisation setting up a new nature market is bespoke. WS4 has learned that our project partners are also in early stages of thinking about the benefits that could be available through nature markets. To encourage a more strategic approach in thinking about how to approach buyers and investors, WS4 organised 'sprint' sessions with three of the project partners.

The 'sprint' sessions, or focussed workshops hosted by WS4, aimed to help overcome the challenges of collaborating and partnering with like-minded organisations (see more detail on 'sprint' sessions below in section 3.3) and help empower organisations to lead collaboration. Partnership project leads and other local nature-based organisations described, in these sessions, their desire to collaborate with each other to benefit from the economies of scale of partnerships. However, some participants in the Severn Solutions for Nature Recovery sprint session expressed some hesitance to partnership due to risks around collaborating when there was still a need to compete against each other for certain funding streams. The dynamics of collaboration and competition among

partnership projects and their potential local partners underscored the need to balance information sharing with the imperative to secure funding.

Additionally, during the programme partner workshop, hosted on 29 February 2024, two WS4 team members discussed how they would benefit from more co-ordination and clear leadership from within government departments. Increased support and responsiveness from government was identified as a potential solution for conflicting priorities and siloed approaches, which were viewed to be hindering policy integration and delivery. Programme leads highlighted the importance of strategic governance, effective collaboration, and policy coherence for achieving desired outcomes. The need for this has become clearer as progress is made within WS4.

Integration of learning

The benefits of exploring blended finance for funding nature-based solutions at landscape scale were discussed by multiple interview respondents and included an increased understanding of:

- what the mechanisms, drivers and incentives are through which NbS can work effectively, and
- how blended finance learning can be integrated with an enhanced evidence base on carbon storage.

Workstream interviewees from WS2 and 3, who have physical science-focussed roles, described how the programme has helped them to gain an understanding of blended finance and its importance for their work. This shows a clear benefit of the integrated nature of the programme and the inclusion of WS4. The interviewees described being able to better understand how their carbon data collection links in with the financial side.

“I was surprised how much of the programme was outside of the raw science side. How much knowledge development there could be outside of the science.” – WS2 interviewee

3.3. To what extent has the evidence generated by WS4 enabled the partnership projects to develop strategic funding plans? How are these going to be implemented.

The original aims for WS4's engagement with the partnership projects has been revised as the programme has progressed. This revision has occurred for two reasons:

- The differing levels of advancement and understanding around blended finance from each of the project teams.
- Delays to programme funding and initiation of the partnership project grants reduced the time available for programme activities.

There is a marked difference between partnership projects in terms of how far advanced their thinking is on blended finance. For some partnership projects, blended finance is a key element of their project:

- Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change,
- Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery,
- Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire Freshwater Network, and
- Derwent Forest Landscape Recovery Project.

For others it is being considered wider across their delivery organisation:

- Plymouth's Natural Grid led by Plymouth County Council, and
- Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration Project led by the National Trust.

Those partnership projects that are pursuing blended finance at an organisational level are thus less involved with the work of WS4. In the Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration project, for example, potential funding models are being explored through commissioned external specialist advice as part of an existing framework contract with Finance Earth Ltd. In addition, project reports indicate that Woodland Carbon Code registration of larger blocks of tree planting for the partnership project have been submitted to central National Trust ahead of planting occurring.

Partnership project members and workstream members shared that the delays in programme procurement caused a lag in engagement with the blended/green finance component of the programme. Members of WS4 stated that initially, the plan was to help partnership projects grow their revenue or sign onto other environmental credit markets. However, there has not been time to do this. The partnership project survey, conducted as part of the evaluation, confirmed that whilst many project teams are exploring blended/green finance opportunities, the majority also reported that they were initially unclear of how this would fit within their contributions to the Nature Returns programme. For one partnership project this uncertainty has remained, and it was felt that the benefit of this aspect of the programme may be to facilitate informal networking between partnership project organisations and others working in this space. This was confirmed by discussions with WS4 members who shared that they found partnership project members to be initially unsure in conversation around blended finance and the steps to take. Moving forward, it would be useful to help the project teams think strategically about how to fund their vision for their specific landscape and develop local partnership working.

Blended finance sprint sessions

Where blended finance is an element of the partnership project as opposed to addressed within the partnership project's wider organisation, WS4 have pursued the idea of 'sprint' sessions. These sessions are focussed workshops which aim to make rapid progress on a specific subject. Ahead of the events a WS4 respondent noted that the "Purpose is to provide a catalyst event, do 'a year's work in two days' to get the conversation around green finance - and its reliance on partnership and collaboration - moving". The sprint session design has evolved over time based on the needs of each partnership project and lead organisation, meaning that they have become more bespoke. Broadly the sprint sessions aimed to answer the following questions:

- What is the partnership project organisation's vision for the catchment/ landscape?
- What action is needed to deliver that vision, and who can do it?
- What funding do they currently have and what funding do they need?
- Are they only looking at grant funding? How could they consider private beneficiaries?
- How will they work together as a partnership to bring in the funding – would they consider a legal structure of some sort? Why/ why not?
- Are they empowered to convene people at a catchment or landscape scale? If so – what can they do with that? If not – how can they be empowered or who is more suitable?

WS4 ran sprint sessions with three partnership projects (Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery, Derwent Forest Landscape Recovery Project and Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change) in February and early March 2024. A sprint session was not run with the Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire Freshwater Network, said to be due to a lack of engagement between the Freshwater Habitats Trust (FHT) team and the programme team and a perceived lack of direction provided to FHT by WS4. The WS4 team identified that the Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire Freshwater Network partnership project was less

place-based (based within multiple landscapes and catchments) than the other partnership projects meaning that it was difficult to articulate within which structures partnerships could be developed and blended finance opportunities taken. However, WS4 now feel that they can use the knowledge gained during these first sprint sessions and the other activities within WS4 to look again at how they may be able to assist this project over the next year.

The Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change and Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery partnership projects each had one full-day workshop sprint session which brought together local organisations with an interest in nature markets, and which focussed on discussing how taking a collaborative approach can support development of strategic funding plans for the catchment or landscape as well as reducing transaction costs for engaging buyers, investors or nature markets. The Derwent Forest Landscape Recovery partnership project had two half-day sprint workshops, reflecting their more advanced knowledge and capability around blended finance. The first brought together organisations and groups from across Derbyshire who are working towards similar visions for habitat restoration and flood risk management with the aim of understanding how they can work together to increase impact and utilise market opportunities. The second was for DWT only to discuss how their activities match with a collaborative approach and market opportunities. At this stage none of the sprint sessions involved potential buyers or investors, it is hoped that this can be achieved for some partnership projects in the next phase of the programme.

The sprint sessions, facilitated by the Environment Agency and Eunomia Consulting, were said by one project team to be a unique opportunity to connect with local stakeholders who are active in the same sector but in a neutral environment. It was felt by the project team that the Environment Agency and Eunomia Consulting led facilitation would give credibility to the discussions and allow more open discussions with a less competitive feel as these organisations often compete for the same funding. The support from WS4 on the blended finance aspect was highlighted by the project team as a huge benefit of this project. Reflections from participants collected by WS4 were that the sessions were helpful in terms of:

- Creating a mandate with which to convene others and understanding the importance of doing so.
- Exploring areas of further work such as around understanding activity on green finance in their area and where the project organisation may fit.
- Motivating more collaboration with other organisations.

For the future, the evaluation will explore how these sessions, and ongoing collaboration with WS4, provide the organisation and structure necessary to move partnership projects forward in their understanding of how to diversify their funding options and plan for the future. Further workshops or sprint sessions should integrate formal collection of participant feedback in their initial design.

WS4 engagement with partnership projects

Initial conversations with the Environment Agency were said to have been broadly beneficial to those partnership projects engaged in blended finance, helping project team's grow their understanding of what might be possible in terms of private funding, exploring what their product is and what they can sell. The benefits of these discussions were particularly around learning the language of blended finance and feeling confident talking to investors or buyers, including what they are looking for and what evidence they need. Interviews with WS4 found discussions to be centred on exploring whether the partnerships are interested in different governance models; whether they understand the

pros and cons of different aggregation models and legal structures; if they have developed a funding strategy that includes consideration of a range of funding sources; and whether and how they have engaged with private investors. In addition, meetings between the partnership projects hosted by the programme were also found to be informative, particularly those on the Woodland Carbon Code and blended finance models.

Programme documents show that WS4 have produced project summaries for each of the partnership projects detailing initial thinking on blended finance, scope and level of blended finance knowledge and use. The summaries will be updated to track partnership project blended finance learning journey across the course of the programme. These will be updated through quarterly reporting of each of the projects and engagement between WS4 and the partnership projects.

Amongst the partnership projects, there was particular interest in using the Nature Returns brand to help engage with and sell to investors. The importance of Nature Returns being a government-backed initiative was said, by one project team, to be a valuable facet of the programme that would hopefully lead to greater investor confidence.

Recommendations

- Explore next steps with the partnership projects to continue to build momentum around blended finance in terms of building understanding of opportunities to collaborate, share knowledge and pursue funding opportunities, and engage with all partnership projects where possible. Sharing between partnership projects who are further ahead in their thinking or whose organisations are pursuing funding opportunities may help to share ideas and support those partnership projects that are less advanced.
- Explore ways of bringing together the research from the Environment Agency and the Forestry Commission on blended finance and exploring its applicability and relevance to partnership projects to have more collective impact and make research accessible to future NbS projects.
- Look at developing a repository for blended finance research from the Nature Returns programme and beyond (or promote any that already exist).
- Educate others, particularly government departments, of the need for ongoing conservation and relationship building with blended funding stakeholders to enable collaboration across different organisations and scales.
- Share learning more widely on the barriers to developing a functioning market for NbS approaches and the practical action needed to overcome these barriers.

Next steps for the evaluation

- Assess the effectiveness of WS4-led sprint sessions in meeting their objectives to help partnership projects develop strategic funding plans, through feedback from participants during and after the sessions.
- Continue to discuss with partnership projects their thinking and progress on blended finance and governance, be it around collaboration with similar organisations, developing blended funding strategies or interacting with specific investors, through continuing to develop the partnership project case studies.

- Explore governance arrangements with partnership projects in order to be able to link to outcomes in the future and to understand what impact landowner relationships may have on implementation.
- Explore the potential impacts of investor engagement activities and commissioned research on wider stakeholders and government departments.

4. Programme collaboration and management

This section explores collaboration, firstly with the partnership projects, in selecting, engaging and managing them, and secondly between programme partners and workstreams.

Guiding evaluation questions
<p>Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Was the process for recruitment and selection of partnership projects timely and efficient? Why? What worked for whom in what circumstances? How well have delivery organisations worked together to deliver the programme? In what circumstances did they work well together, or not, and why? <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the learning from the programme for each of the partner organisations, their ways of working and opportunities for future collaboration? To what extent and how is the programme expected to influence joint working between the partners in the future?
Extent to which evaluation questions can be answered
An exploration of the ways in which partners have collaborated, the driving forces behind patterns seen and early lessons were evident while questions about the long-term impacts and future opportunities could not be answered.
Strength of evidence (<i>for the findings presented</i>)
The evidence base is extensive on the subject of collaborative working, and although findings were mixed, the different perspectives were generally supported through multiple sources.
Research tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviews with workstream teams and programme partners (n=32) Interviews with partnership project leads (n=6) Programme monitoring data analysis (n=556) Monitoring survey (n=8) Programme workshop findings (n=1)

Key findings

- The partnership project selection process is said by partners to have been transparent and democratic and to have led to a set of partnership project landscapes that are, for the most part, diverse in habitat and in governance.
- There were several improvements to the partnership project application process suggested including revised funding reporting and consideration of the timing of deadlines for applications.
- Management of the partnership projects has been positive in terms of shared learning and the role of the partnership project adviser in providing support but could be enhanced by being clearer on expectations and commitments. Overall, project teams gave positive feedback on their interaction with the programme team, particularly the partnership project advisers.

- Cooperation between the different programme partner organisations and the development of collaborative partnerships was universally considered to be a success of the programme.
- Openness, trust, mutual respect and common motivators were credited as being factors for delivering the desired outcomes of the programme.
- The division of the programme into workstreams has aided focused working, complemented each organisation's strengths and avoided duplication of effort but sharing information has not always been sufficient, and there was some discussion of a lack of understanding of what other partners are doing early on in the programme.
- Skills development with the partnership projects and between workstreams has, although small in scale, been a bigger feature of the programme than first envisaged. There is further opportunity to increase skills such as monitoring and communications amongst project teams to strengthen the legacy of the programme.

4.1. Was the process for recruitment and selection of partnership projects timely and efficient? Why? What worked for whom in what circumstances?

Partnership project selection process

The partnership project selection process was said, by one workstream interviewee, to be open, transparent and democratic. Overall, the programme team members interviewed were pleased with the selection and felt that a good diversity of habitats, geography and expertise was covered. However, a few gaps were noted in that uplands were not widely represented and there could perhaps have been more heathland habitats included. Other interviewees, however, noted that the partnership project in Exmoor is in some respects an upland area, and that the partnership project criteria specified they were not looking for large peatland areas, which may already be captured under a peatland grant scheme and better understood in terms of carbon capture more generally. It was also noted that more could have been done to encourage trialling of climate resilient measures such as growing tree varieties from warmer climates which may be most suitable for UK climates in the future. Experimental land management approaches would have involved specific trialling, however, and the decision was made to exclude such approaches and to only consider options aligning with existing agri-environment schemes. Interview data from partnership teams also suggests that for some there could have been more clarity around the requirements on the blended finance aspect of the project as they were not clear on the scope of this work. Programme monitoring documents lay out the criteria used to select the partnership projects. Overall, the criteria appear to have been met but perspectives from those outside of the selection process including organisations with rejected partnership project applications were not included, which limits confidence somewhat (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 - Analysis of partnership project selection criteria and the degree to which the partnership projects selected reflect these criteria

Selection criteria*	Degree to which criteria was met**
"Proposals should include a willingness to generate revenue from ecosystem services, such as selling carbon credits from woodland creation or peatland restoration, or selling	Interview and survey data show partnership projects appear willing to pursue green finance but differ in terms of their capacity and are impacted by limited opportunities to sell

Selection criteria*	Degree to which criteria was met**
biodiversity units from a habitat bank, using the appropriate standards, or attracting capital investment."	ecosystem services. For example, where partnership projects are run on National Trust land the partnership project is constrained by the National Trusts' organisation-level strategy for finance and will need to align with the organisations official position on carbon credits. A Forestry Commission interviewee also shared that some sites are keen to engage with the green finance aspect as they may see an opportunity to support the local community through the sale or availability of credits. Opportunities for green finance are being explored with the partnership projects over the next few months and the programme offers the potential to learn about which factors lead partnership projects to progress in pursuing blended finance opportunities.
"Priority will be given to projects that can provide evidence of being able to meet the need both for rapid implementation and long-term maintenance."	Partnership projects, for the most part and evidenced by partnership project reporting documents, have begun implementing habitat restoration and creation at speed, and all are aware of the long-term maintenance commitments. Interview data shows that due to the need for quick delivery, it was explicit that partnership projects should be led by well-established partnerships with existing internal governance arrangements, already working in the landscapes in which the partnership project sites sit. Some partnership projects have experienced unexpected delays in initial implementation.
"An ideal application would include a mixture of partners/interests including conservation and farming, that the land would be mixed use as found across the English countryside. This will allow us to understand the governance arrangements required to enable blended funding approaches and long-term project financing."	Land is mixed use, and the partnership projects differ in terms of their mix of partners, as stated by interviewees and seen in programme documents. Whether the differences are enough to attain meaningful evidence on the impact of governance arrangements on outcomes is to be explored further.
"Ideal applications would include at least two of our focus/priority habitats in more than one location as part of the creation/restoration plans with similar habitats that had been created/restored previously. This would allow carbon measurement of both new and established habitats."	According to programme documentation this criterion appears to have been met. According to UK CEH analysis, it is unclear how WS2 and 3 are using control sites to measure impact. Some partnership project sites were also said by one interviewee to occur over larger areas than initially expected.

(* Selection criteria extracted from the Application Guidance document given to potential applicants for the partnership project grant) (** Analysis of the degree to which the chosen partnership projects reflect the selection criteria reflects triangulation of programme documentation such as progress reports and applications from partnership projects, as well as interview data from interviewees across the programme).

Partnership project application process

The bid submission process was said by several project teams to be open and transparent and the ability to develop a bespoke project, flexible to the needs of the individual landscape, was appreciated. Similarly, one project team thought the tender was informative and detailed, guiding their bid and making its creation easier. Programme partner interviews suggested several improvements to the application process including:

- Recording financial information - The financial breakdown table in the template during partnership project applications broke the finances down by asset or activity that funds would be spent on rather than by financial year. This created complications when drawing up the partnership project contracts as the expenditure then had to be split by financial year so the WS1 team had to map the expenditure for assets against the project milestones. An improved template which reflected what is needed later in the process would be useful next time.
- Landowners consent - One WS1 interviewee expressed a need for a more secure process for applications, and the need to provide reassurances that third party landowners agree with partnership project plans and understand the commitment for their land. The current process asked applicants to confirm that they had landowner permission to proceed but as the partnership projects have progressed and had further discussions with landowners one has experienced landowners backing out of the process after discussions of how long land would need to be in an agreement. One WS2 interviewee would like to have a better process for reassurance of landowner involvement and so far, have found it easier to work with partnerships that directly involve the landowners rather than using a third-party intermediary:

“We’re seeking a bit more reassurance than actually what you’ve said you’re going to do is achievable and it’s much easier where the landowners are involved in the partnership or where they are the applicant, but where it’s a third party who isn’t directly involved it’s a bit more challenging. Not quite sure what that [further reassurance] would look like yet.” – WS1 interviewee

One partnership project lead highlighted the need for space in the financial application form to budget for a landscape architect role. For their partnership project they included this role in the earth works budget but felt that this role should be recognised as important for writing specifications, producing designs, procuring contractors and ensuring cohesion with the landscape. Partnership projects led by prominent nature trusts often have this resource in-house and therefore can budget it differently to partnership projects led by third-party organisations who are contracting all expertise.

It was suggested by two interviewees (WS1 and the FC) that there may have been some ‘application weariness’ amongst the pool of potential partnership project applications as the application process was forced to launch directly after a bid round for Landscape Recovery and was also during the busy summer holiday period. This was not seen to be a concern by others, however, as a conscious decision to conduct only “modest” promotion of the grant was taken in order to avoid being overwhelmed by applications.

Project teams felt that the short time given to produce applications impacted on their level of ambition and ability to engage land managers. A ‘warm-up’ webinar was held on the 14th June 2022 to introduce the Programme and raise awareness of the upcoming application window with potential applicants. According to the Invitation to Apply Document, partnership project applicants received the Invitation to Apply (ITA) on 7th July 2022, with the application deadline being 29th August (12:00). Applicants were able to ask clarification questions between the 7th and 22nd of July 2022. The short timescale of the partnership project application process reduced the ability of partnership project lead organisations to encourage participation from land managers who are less engaged in

nature projects. As such, the land managers involved in the partnership projects tend to be environmentally minded and would have been keen to undertake the nature-based solutions works anyway. Overall, it was felt that the partnership projects selected, and the applications received met the criteria set out and no major gaps have been identified.

4.2. How well have delivery organisations worked together to deliver the programme? In what circumstances did they work well together, or not, and why?

Collaboration with partnership projects

The combination of workstreams and partnership projects is thought, by workstream leads, to offer potential for exploration of how best partnership projects can be implemented, supported, and integrated with the wider programme. The perspectives of the project teams, and investigation into the projects' set up, operation, objectives and achievements were the focus of interactions with partnership projects (detailed in the Annex), summarised along with findings from scoping and programme partners interviews here.

Delays

Delays to the programme linked to Defra Group commercial procurement timelines affected grant and partnership project implementation, and habitat works as discussed in section 2. The delays were linked to slow procurement (including grants processes and standard contracts) and a challenging recruitment environment in 2021/22, referenced in the Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) report. As a result, the programme and partnership project activities had to fit into a shorter window of time (2 years for the workstreams and 1 year for the partnership projects), and while they were said to have been set up and running quickly, it was noted that there was a lot of work to do in a short time as well as little time for deliberation and scoping. This short duration meant that where or if there were implementation challenges the activities could not be repeated, particularly considering the seasonal nature of activities and monitoring. One of the impacts of these delays in terms of the partnership projects is the degree to which workstreams have been able to interact directly and meaningfully with the partnership projects. One example given of this impact on interaction was the ability for WS4 to recruit staff to support the blended finance work. Due to the late onboarding of project partnerships, WS4 did not have time available to externally recruit staff and due to internal pressure on existing teams with the skills needed, knew that internal assignments would be unlikely to have capacity to give sufficient focus to the WS4 work, given the assumed end of project date of March 2024. This has meant WS4 has relied more heavily on consultants than originally intended for research, as well as facilitation support. The inclusion of additional chrono-sequence sites has already been discussed (see section 2) as has the changing focus of WS4's engagement with the partnership projects (see section 3).

Management processes

Two areas of administration, reporting and claiming process/funding changes were noted as being particularly challenging and time consuming. Reporting is discussed in section 6. Fund changes and claiming processes were said to lack guidance, require ongoing conversation with multiple people at Natural England and take a considerable amount of time (in one instance a change in allocation of funding took five months for Defra to agree during which time no work can take place on this change).

Relationship with programme partners

Overall, the benefit of interaction with the partnership projects was acknowledged by all and relationships with programme partners were said to be positive. Many project teams remarked that engagement with Natural England, the Environment Agency, and the Forestry Commission¹ through the programme allowed them to create contacts and include different viewpoints on their project plans. One team discussed the inclusion of programme partners on the partnership project advisory and steering groups to be beneficial for building relationships and sharing expertise. They further described a close relationship with the Forestry Commission to develop grant applications for woodland and receiving training on the woodland carbon code. The Forestry Commission expressed, through programme documents, a desire to continue in this training role and were keen to support the partnership project advisers in developing shared learning plans for the partnership projects. The site visit from the programme team was seen to be useful in forming connections and sharing knowledge.

Programme documents show that in December the Forestry Commission Nature Recovery Advisers reported that they had difficulty working with the partnership project advisers. They understood the need to not overwhelm the partnership projects but felt that more contact and joint meetings would have been beneficial. Documents from January show that meetings have taken place between the partnership project advisers and the Forestry Commission and a 'joint ways of working' framework has been developed. The documents suggest that this more cohesive communication has resolved the issue and contributions from each ALB are more valued.

Partnership project advisers

Interaction with multiple partners without overburdening the project teams has proven challenging and the partnership project adviser role, who are the partnership projects' main contact within Natural England (and WS1), is said to have helped. Having a consistent single point of contact for the partnership projects in the project adviser was identified as beneficial by the project teams, allowing trust and understanding between the two parties to develop. Having someone who understands the issues that project teams are facing both externally to the partnership projects and internally to the programme, and someone who can communicate any issues to Natural England, and who understands the bureaucracy, was said to contribute to this positive relationship. The team felt supported in navigating the challenges of contract changes, the claims process and the changes to the reporting template. In addition, an interviewee from WS2 noted the benefits the role of the partnership project adviser has brought to their work. They highlighted that this was beneficial for building trust, in turn facilitating efficient set up and completion of baseline monitoring and surveying for the NE WS2 field team:

"You can't, as a scientist, just roll up on a field and start digging and expect the landowners to be on board with everything. The partnership project advisers have been great for building up that relationship with the partnership projects and landowners and acting as an intermediary between us. This has been super helpful." – WS2 interviewee

Interviews with partnership project advisers have explored some of the ways their role could be enhanced in connecting the partnership projects to the wider programme and vice versa. These include:

- Providing training for the project advisers on processes key to the partnership projects functioning such as on contracts, finance, and procurement to ensure they are able to respond the project team's queries

¹ RBG Kew has not had a formal role in engaging with the partnership projects through WS3, therefore not included in this remark.

quickly and effectively. To date, the types of issues partnership projects have faced include resourcing issues, short timescales linked to the delays in issuing contracts and the number of meetings to attend, knowing how to fill out progress report forms and understanding the change control process.

- Increasing adviser's understanding of the broader programme and individual workstream objectives and work to allow them to answer partnership project questions in this area. Attendance at forum sessions and semi-regular catch ups with Forestry Commission Nature Recovery Advisers were instituted to enable wider understanding of the programme.
- Defining the adviser role, in terms of what they need to know in order to help the partnership projects, how they will interact with the partnership projects, and how they might help collect information.

Programme requirements

Feedback from the partnership projects suggests that the amount of time and resources they needed to commit to the programme through reporting and meetings has been more than was indicated initially (the application guidance states a commitment of one day per month, but most project teams felt it was more than this in reality). Some project teams felt that they did not have the resources to meet the commitments. It was thought, by several project teams, that the programme's expectations of partnership projects, in terms of community engagement, blended finance and monitoring, could have been clearer from the outset, although it was acknowledged that these expectations have changed over the course of the programme. As a result, however, the project team have had to adapt their resourcing and put additional resource into aspects of the project that weren't anticipated when they initially applied. A WS1 interviewee stated that there was a lot of demand for partnership project interaction from each partner organisation and workstream. This required partnership projects to allocate resources to such activities and potentially away from activities on the ground. To support project teams planning their resources it would be useful to provide a clearer indication of time and reporting as well as clearer communication on how the partnership projects can benefit from interaction with each of the partner organisations.

In addition, project team members highlighted a lack of flexibility shown by the programme team in the early stages of the programme, which was said to have since improved. Where project team members work part time hours, they have sometimes found that programme meetings and events did not accommodate them by offering a choice of dates. The project teams were pleased when the programme team started using polls to understand project team members availability when scheduling commitments.

Providing support for the partnership projects is an ongoing learning process. The partnership projects vary in terms of their governance, habitats, activities, scale, and number of land managers. Several respondents noted that the partnership projects also differ in terms of how much experience they have of being part of a bigger programme such as this, with some relatively inexperienced in large grant funding and the reporting requirements that go along with that. The result of these differences is that support provided needs to be tailored to the partnership projects. Partnership project management was said, by a WS1 interviewee, to have been flexible, adapting as the programme has progressed such as modifying the change request form to make it clearer and more user friendly.

Communication and knowledge sharing

There was said to be good communication between the Natural England programme team and project teams with a flexible approach to problem solving. There was some confusion, however, as to the routes through which individuals from the workstreams would contact the partnership projects, communication occurring through the partnership project adviser, through the Natural England field team or directly. Direct contact with the partnership projects has eased the level of coordination necessary by partnership project advisers but doesn't allow for oversight of the burden on partnership projects. In addition, it was questioned as to why partnership projects and programme partners weren't having more conversations around developing plans for the next funded period.

A significant request from the project teams was for more sharing between the partnership projects. This was said to have been largely absent from the programme to date. One project team felt that it would have been motivating to hear about all the other work being done and the potential impacts for policy. A clear view of the 'bigger picture' would have helped the project team to add further clarity to their communications with stakeholders and discussions with partners.

Partnership project forums were first instituted in August 2023, with subsequent forums on 16th November 2023 and a face-to-face event from 13th-14th February 2024. At present, partnership project forums are set to occur every 6 weeks, and from the date of writing (March 2024), the next forum will occur on 11th April 2024, with another face-to-face event in September. Partnership project forums were said by project teams to have been useful to gain a wider understanding of the programme and start to build relationships across partnership projects, but they have not included a mechanism for sharing information and knowledge. The results from the partnership project forum feedback survey run by WS1 for the February 2024 partnership project forum showed that feedback was generally positive with participants appreciating the opportunity to meet in person and understand the ways each partnership project was dealing with challenges. In terms of suggested improvements, it was felt that more time was needed to discuss topics such as monitoring, challenges of creation and management of habitats and science. More generally, it was suggested by project teams that centring partnership project meetings around specific topics, questions or problems that need to be solved could lead to positive outcomes and help the teams deliver when under pressure, again difficult during intense delivery periods. Several teams expressed the need for partnership project-to-partnership project support on monitoring, for example, ways to develop simple, quick and effective ways of measuring community/people engagement outcomes. At a minimum a directory of who is working on what within the programme and partnership projects could be useful, so as to further build those connections and help teams seek advice. There was an aspiration from the partnership projects for the programme to be more collaborative and help to make connections between people working on different aspects in different organisations, to enhance the work of the partnership projects. It was acknowledged, however, that this would have been difficult when projects were in the midst of delivery early on. One project team member said:

"Everyone is enthusiastic but there's not the resources to do everything everyone wants. As a partnership project it's about trialling new ideas and new ways of working and I think that's got the creative juices flowing a little bit." – project team interviewee

Natural England were said to have improved their approach to communication with the partnership projects to make it more collaborative, flexible and inclusive as the programme has progressed. Several project teams have also independently pursued opportunities to learn from each other. The Plymouth Natural Grid team and the Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration project, for example, held a residential week in the summer, which created an opportunity for the two partnership projects to learn from one another and study different topics on nature-based solutions.

Collaboration between programme partners

The relationship between the workstreams and programme partners was discussed by all interviewees as being positive.

“I think we are getting better at working together. I think we have good relationships. I think there's a lot of willingness and interest. It's just people having the time to foster the relationships and being clear about what we're actually doing” – WS4 interviewee

The factors contributing to this close and productive working relationship were suggested as:

- Regular internal and in-person meetings between programme partners
- A strong level of trust and personal respect between organisations
- Purposeful approach of WS1 and the steering group to create collaboration such as the creation of the Joint Ways of Working document.

Steering group and meetings

Weekly and then fortnightly steering group meetings throughout the programme have been reported by interviewees to have helped to foster collaboration and to build connection despite partners working in different areas in different places. The steering group, responsible for the day-to-day running of the programme, has worked with the programme board, who input on major strategic decisions and provide advice. Interview data suggests that the programme board, and particularly the chair of the board, has been found to be very helpful and engaged although attendance has been patchy. Their support may become more important around dissemination in the later stages of the programme. Initially when the programme kicked off, some interviewees felt that it was challenging to understand the structure and purpose of the meetings. This has been resolved as time has passed and more workstreams have been included in meetings. Interview data and programme documentation such as meeting minutes show that meetings appear to involve open conversations between partners and there is a general openness to collaboration across the workstreams to maximise use of expertise where needed.

Many of the interviewees from across the workstreams commented that the frequency of meetings was good and that these regular meetings have been a key factor in each partner understanding the perspectives and aims of the other partners and having opportunity to discuss any issues. A group of participants at the programme workshop agreed that the increased frequency of online meetings for regular programme board and steering group meetings, as a result of changed ways of working from the COVID-19 pandemic, was positive. It was felt that online meetings (compared to in-person meetings) could often be more focused, timely and cut down significantly on travel time. However, the benefits of in-person meetings were acknowledged by the group and by interviewees throughout the timeline of the evaluation. It is felt that in-person meetings had the most benefit when they centred around a site visit, such as the programme board meeting that was combined with a site visit. These in-person meetings have been particularly beneficial for building personal relationships between individuals in the team. However, programme documents do suggest that at times concerns have been raised about the balance between in-person commitments and delivery of workstreams. For example, there were two-day meetings in both January and February 2024 and WS2 raised concerns about the impact of this on team availability and achievement of deliverables. It was noted that this was being monitored and managed.

Trusting and collaborative relationships

Interviewees from across workstreams commented that some of the positive working relationships should be credited to the personalities of those involved in the programme with everyone being highly motivated by the potential impacts of the programme and open to collaboration due to high levels of respect for each other's expertise and an understanding of the benefits strong collaboration can bring. One interviewee commented that the way that the programme has been split into the workstreams complements each delivery organisations strengths and avoids having two organisations with potentially conflicting solutions (e.g., where different ALBs have different preferences for land use change in an area) working on the same activities. Instead, specific inputs are sought from other delivery organisations when their expertise is a good fit and collaboration is seen as a positive tool to enhance outcomes.

Some interviewees, however, felt that sometimes programme partners needed to be reminded to share information and updates as it was easy for teams to be very focussed on their workstream and lose focus on the bigger picture. This was not thought to necessarily create issues rather all workstreams were keen to avoid siloed working and keep updated on the activities of other workstreams and how they can all align.

Overall, all interviewees felt that the delivery partners were working well together. It was felt by most interviewees that WS1 has been instrumental in creating a collaborative relationship, handling the difficult challenges the programme has faced and staying focused to the programme's aims. WS1 interviewees reported making an active effort to encourage collaboration across the programme. Programme documents show that a set of joint ways of working principles had been developed which covered collaboration, respect and motivations. WS3 was also specifically mentioned as being the result of a collaborative effort from a number of organisations. RBG Kew is working with the University of Sussex, Imperial College London and Royal Holloway University of London to conduct the scientific activities of WS3. Programme documents state that this multi-organisation team have a strong history of working together and a:

"demonstrable track record in collaborative, integrative projects founded on effective communication and governance, exemplified by the AHRC Mobile Museum project and cross-institutional collaboration on UKRI Collaborative Doctoral Awards" - WS3 document

Interview data shows that each delivery organisation is motivated to continue collaborative working with the other delivery organisations in the future. In particular, RBG Kew see many opportunities to collaborate further with the Natural England team around carbon science and nature-based solutions. Interviewees also saw opportunities to continue collaboration with the Forestry Commission on carbon codes in development. An interviewee from WS3 described how involvement in the programme has enabled useful insight into the needs and wants of the other partner organisations and has helped them to prioritise what is communicated and identify the questions that they can answer to add value.

In the programme workshop programme leads reflected that the shared outcomes fund had provided flexibility and empowerment for local partnerships, although opportunities for improved collaboration with DESNEZ and Defra have been identified, particularly in mapping of stakeholders to guide dissemination. Additionally, the benefits of the ALB's working together was demonstrated through examples of mitigating funding delays and funding thresholds by utilising other ALB funding pathways. For example, where the Natural England funding threshold was too low or the pathway too time consuming the programme could utilise RBG Kew's funding pathways to procure Johnson Banks for the communications work.

As the interview and documentation evidence shows, this programme has established positive ways of working across Natural England, the Environment Agency, RBG Kew

and the Forestry Commission and these ways of working should continue to be documented and internalised by each of the organisations.

Natural England looked to maximise their understanding of collaboration through an externally contracted project which collected a variety of views on partnership working across partnership projects, programme and local delivery teams in different ALBs to understand what makes a successful partnership. This work aimed to identify and understand the common challenges around partnerships. The report for this work, completed by Eunomia Research and Consulting is now available. Overall, this linked project adds to the evidence base around partnership best practices and will inform the evaluation going forward.

Workstream integration

Despite a largely positive sense of the working relationships between programme partners, a poor awareness of what other programme partners were doing was discussed by several interviewees. Many interviewees agreed that there was a need to bring everyone together more often to share information and find common threads. Some felt disconnected from other workstreams and from the partnership projects and partnership project advisers, and building these relationships is taking time. An early sense of confusion over the roles and responsibilities of the different partner organisations and more generally over how the programme should be run were mentioned as challenges that have been overcome and may have been impacted by the programme originally being a series of individual projects.

Early on, workstreams were pursued in quite a self-contained way, as discrete work packages with specific objectives and challenges. Reflections from interviewees show that while it was necessary to work in a focused way in order to get the programme up and running at this point in the programme aggregation and integration of effort and findings is very important. Interaction and sharing between workstreams is said to have been largely ad hoc to date and based on need. Where connections have been made, however, they are said to have been productive and useful.

Workstreams 2 and 3

Collaboration between WS2 and WS3 was highlighted as a success of workstream integration in the programme. Interview data from WS2 and 3 show that there has been collaboration between the two workstreams linked to their common interests around carbon science, particularly around the development of a method for investigating carbon in hedgerows and scrub using Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) measurements. For example, WS2 have contracted a Kew staff member to work on secondary development of LiDAR methodology and programme documentation shows that this initial contract has been extended. Knowledge sharing between WS2 and WS3 was a conscious effort with regular catch ups scheduled. An example of this is regular communication between gas flux and above ground carbon experts at RBG Kew and those at Natural England, which was noted by a WS3 interviewee to be a 'really useful partnership' as there are very few experts in this area in the UK. The WS3 interviewee also expects a close working relationship to develop between the below ground carbon experts at RBG Kew and Natural England, which although not currently as strong could be strengthened once there are more substantial data. Interviewees from both workstreams expressed that this joined up way of working has been more useful than they imagined, and has led to idea generation, visits and improving communications between carbon experts across the two organisations. Programme documentation shows that this collaborative effort has continued throughout the programme as WS2 and WS3 had a two-day workshop in

February 2024 to discuss research methods and work towards cohesive reporting of the two workstreams.

Workstream 3 and partnership projects

WS3 feel that more integration with the partnership projects would be beneficial, particularly for collaboration on methods for habitat monitoring and around community engagement and citizen science opportunities. They have recently started interacting with Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust on their partnership project to discuss the use of eDNA for studying biodiversity. This is a good example of how expertise is being shared across the programme. Interview data from multiple members of WS3 shows that they would also like to collaborate with the partnership projects in the use of their LiDAR technology and to replicate one plot between Wakehurst and a partnership project site to strengthen the data and findings from the programme.

“I’m surprised that there aren’t more conversations happening between our workstream and the partnership project sites... I realised as well that they [the partnership projects] have a lot of community involvement, a lot of citizen science and a lot of social outreach and I think that there’s a real opportunity to collaborate on that as well. It might not be in the scope of this project, but I’m surprised that there isn’t more discussion about those things.” – WS3 interviewee

Workstreams 3 and 4

Interview responses from WS3 indicate that there has been less integration with WS4, but this should increase as scientific results start being shared, particularly in terms of the need to build a stronger carbon evidence base in order to support carbon markets and pricing. It was also mentioned in interviews that WS4 was particularly adept at creating connections between the different parts of the programme and also connecting people with relevant work the Environment Agency is doing outside of the programme. It was suggested in an interview with a member of the WS3 team that as the programme progresses and the landscape modelling tool from WS3 is developed and able to incorporate programme data that it will be able to interact more with the blended finance aspect of the programme. WS3 foresee stronger interlinks with WS4 by providing strong evidence to feed into offsetting schemes and environmental markets but time will be needed to work on these interlinks.

“Some of the stuff that’s coming out from workstream 4, for example how you might look at payments and how that compares to how you might review the landscape and its carbon and biodiversity. I can now see the two coming together quite easily, but we need more time essentially to bring these together.” – WS3 interviewee

Partnership project advisers and workstreams

There were mixed views around the integration of the partnership project advisers with other workstreams. Members of WS1 and WS2 described in interviews how the partnership project advisers gave some assistance to WS2 with surveys on partnership project sites even though this was ‘not in their job description’.

“We’ve had lots of collaboration with the partnership project advisers, for example we have weekly catch ups for our workstream [WS2] within Natural England and the advisers always join so they are kept up to date and they have all been out in the field with us to help with field work.” – WS2 interviewee

The partnership project advisers, however, felt that they had spare capacity to be further integrated into WS2 in terms of writing up data or conducting further surveys in order to reduce the strain on the WS2 field team. In addition, the partnership project adviser role may benefit from better integration with other workstreams, in terms of understanding the

broader work and planned activities, since the partnership projects have a lot of questions relating to different aspects of the programme.

There was said to have been collaborative working between the Nature Recovery Advisers from the Forestry Commission and the partnership project advisers from Natural England, with joint site visits taking place. An interviewee reported that this has allowed for knowledge exchange and reduced the chance that advice and messages to the partnership project are contradictory. Forestry Commission has also been giving bespoke advice to the partnership projects around the Woodland Carbon Code to ensure compliance where it is sought.

“We’re providing some bespoke advice to each of the partnership projects for the Woodland Carbon Code, and that’s one area where we’re looking to provide positive benefit for people so that they get the best advice they can get on the Woodland Carbon Code and how it applies to them. We will give them advice on what they need to do so that they don’t disqualify themselves from joining the Code.” – FC interviewee

Forestry Commission

One Forestry Commission interviewee mentioned that they would have liked the Forestry Commission to have had a more central role or even lead one of the workstreams. Because Forestry Commission advisers were appointed at a later stage than Natural England advisers, interview data shows they were not fully aware of what all the partners had achieved up to that point, and felt that they did not necessarily have the same influence over the type of habitat restorations occurring. Specifically, some Forestry Commission partnership project advisers would have liked to see more woodland habitat creation with some exploration of mixed/multi-purpose woodlands, as this would better match up with their other work on the Shared Outcomes Fund (i.e. blended finance in WS4). However, it was recognised from the outset of the programme that other habitats were the priority to help fill evidence gaps in both carbon flux and approaches to carbon and blended finance, with woodland an established route to sourcing private finance.

Interview data, programme documentation, and programme partner workshop data indicate that collaboration and integration between workstreams is thought to be integral to the success of the programme. Bringing together the two science-based workstreams with the blended finance and governance aspects is expected to maximise the learning and future applicability of the programme outputs. There is evidence that this integration is beginning to happen, for example through WS3 working with the Forestry Commission to review the carbon codes using the data generated through the programme.

Skills development

Programme partners and project teams expressed that skills development has been a bigger feature of the programme than originally envisaged. The upskilling of project teams has included sharing technical knowledge and providing equipment for data collection. This was not an original intention but has been a benefit, particularly in the Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change partnership project where project teams have been helped to understand and make their own carbon measurements. The Natural England field team and specialists have worked closely with the Wansbeck project team who have the scope, budget and interest, to study greenhouse gas fluxes, developing their capacity to continue monitoring. A number of Derbyshire Wildlife Trust staff and trainees have accompanied the survey team during the baseline surveys, which has enabled them to learn more about the techniques and processes involved in collecting carbon data. One team member said that:

“[The NE team that came to help with the carbon monitoring] are absolutely incredible. they were so good at bringing that wider context to our team and taking them out and doing the soil coring... I absolutely love working with [that] team.” – Project team interviewee

Recommendations

For better programme collaboration and maximisation of opportunities:

- Continue to reflect on how partnership project advisers may be better integrated and help other workstreams including through forum and catch-up sessions. Clarity should be provided on this role ahead of any subsequent funding periods, along with the necessary training to ensure they have the programme and administrative knowledge to guide the partnership projects.
- Ensure regular agenda items on sharing information to allow for better understanding of the working of workstream partners and potentially host more deep dives between workstreams to increase knowledge sharing as findings become available.
- Upskill all partnership projects to continue carbon and biodiversity monitoring and expand their capabilities in this area.
- As evidence collection comes to an end, working in an integrated and collective way may become more important, particularly in terms of coordinating dissemination and communications activities. This will require significant coordination across the workstreams.
- A number of opportunities for further collaboration were discussed, and should time allow, could include:
 - the integration of WS2 and 3 data with carbon pricing and markets as explored by the Forestry Commission and WS4.
 - a collaborative effort between WS2 and 3 in communicating the science to a wide and varied audience
 - WS1 navigating the links between the scientific data and the work of the partnership projects,
 - WS2,3,4 and the partnership projects contributing to and using the Landscape Modelling and Mapping Tool, and
 - WS2 and 3 providing further guidance and monitoring for partnership projects such as introducing the use of LiDAR.

For engaging with project teams:

- Allowing for a scoping period for partnership projects to enable community consultation, fully developed monitoring plans, clearer understanding of expectations and researching of the best methods for delivery.
- Provide additional guidance on monitoring to ensure a level of consistency across the partnership projects and sufficient set up for blended finance monitoring requirements.
- Ensuring that the timing of contracts issued considers the nature and timing of the work being proposed (including surveying).
- Faster mobilisation of key aspects of the programme such as the baseline monitoring and the Nature Returns communication strategy to reduce delays to partnership project delivery.

- Include more thorough costing forms in the applications to ensure the applicants can sufficiently and transparently lay out the costs. These should be suitable for all governance types.
- For future partnership project application rounds, if they were to occur, think about:
 - Timing, to ensure it does not occur during busy periods or conflict with other grant funding rounds
 - Providing enough time and guidance to applicants on securing effective landholder agreements, and
 - Allowing time for co-development of objectives and strategies.

Next Steps for the evaluation

- Continue to explore ways of working within the programme team and with the partnership projects.
- Explore workstream integration as more findings and conclusions become available, looking for where workstreams are able to use the findings of other workstreams to further their work.
- Analyse the extent to which workstream findings are integrated within communications.

5. Stakeholder engagement and dissemination of learning

This section explores how activities undertaken and findings from the programme have been communicated to date and how programme partner and partnership project organisations are engaging with different stakeholders, including local communities, to spread awareness and knowledge of NbS approaches.

Guiding evaluation questions
<p>Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent has learning from the partnership projects and the programme been effectively disseminated? What approaches worked, for whom and why? Who has benefited from this communication? In what ways have partnership projects engaged with local landowners both directly and indirectly involved in the partnership project (where appropriate to partnership project structure)? What approaches worked/ didn't work? For whom and why? In what ways have partnership projects engaged with local stakeholders such as volunteers, community groups and wider stakeholders? What approaches worked/ didn't work? For whom and why? In what ways have programme partners engaged with stakeholders such as policy makers, researchers and investors? What approaches worked/ didn't work? For whom and why? <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent and how have the partnership projects been successful in engaging and building relationships with local communities (increasing social capital) and wider stakeholders? In what ways have communities affected (either positively or negatively) delivery of the partnership projects, how? To what extent and how have programme partners been successful in engaging and building relationships with wider stakeholders?
Extent to which evaluation questions can be answered
The main dissemination of findings and learning will happen in the next phase of the programme therefore, the evaluation questions are partly answered based on the dissemination to date and expectations laid out in interviews. The partnership project case studies provide extensive evidence on their community and stakeholder engagement activities.
Strength of evidence <i>(for the findings presented)</i>
Evidence is strong around dissemination and engagement activities that have taken place with some evidence of impacts. However more evidence of impacts will be collected in the next stage of the evaluation. Evidence on activities and impacts of partnership project engagement is strongest.
Research tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviews with workstream teams and programme partners (n=32) Webinar feedback questionnaire (n=8) Partnership project case studies (n=6) Programme partner workshop (n=1) Programme monitoring documents (n=556)

Key findings

- Dissemination and engagement with researchers and policymakers has taken place to a limited degree within each workstream however this is a focus for the next phase of the programme. Opportunities for this dissemination are being identified.
- The programme partners are experienced in communicating their work to the public and other stakeholders and are well placed to have influence in the land management, environmental and policy sphere.
- The lack of communications guidance from NE and other programme partners early in the programme meant that partnership projects developed their own communications and engagement strategies.
- Natural England communications resource has been stretched as they try to develop guidance at the same time as managing and signing off communications from across the breadth of the programme.
- The Nature Returns brand provides an opportunity to collate the programme's findings under one banner. However, there are mixed views from the project teams on the extent to which they plan to use the Nature Returns branding due to negative wider stakeholder perceptions.
- Reflections on the WS4 webinars were mixed, some attendees finding them informative and useful and some finding them too technical and difficult to engage with.
- Partnership projects are engaging in various ways with a diverse range of stakeholders and their engagement activities are seen as central to achieving the aims of the programme.

5.1. To what extent has learning from the partnership projects and the programme been effectively disseminated? What approaches worked, for whom and why? Who has benefited from this communication?

The majority of dissemination of findings will take place later in the programme when findings have been prepared and collated. However, there has been some dissemination from partnership projects in the form of community engagement and outreach and from WS4 in the form of webinars, which presented the findings from their commissioned research, discussed in section 3, to stakeholders.

In terms of outreach around the main programme of work, interview data and programme documents show that there have been a number of communications across different platforms including one press release and one NE blog post launching the partnership project grant scheme and the programme respectively. There has been an additional NE blog post relating to COP28 (UN climate change conference of parties) which features the Nature Returns programme. Programme documents also show the Nature Returns was featured in NE's 2023 visual round up social media post in December 2023 and as part of a Defra social media campaign.

One WS2 member gave a short talk during a Natural England wide call in October 2023, which was used to raise the profile of the programme with other Natural England teams. The need for findings to be shared internally within delivery organisations was particularly highlighted in interviews. One interviewee suggested incorporating findings into training courses within Natural England, for example, so that information can be shared without overburdening staff.

Workstreams 2 and 3

In interviews, RBG Kew and Natural England described their well-established methods and experience with communicating their science and nature work to the public and other stakeholders. WS3 interviewees described how on other projects they have used audio recordings of their scientists explaining the habitat work that has been done and the research that is being conducted accompanied by signage at their Wakehurst site. Recordings about the Nature Returns carbon science work have been created using RBG Kew's interpretation funding but are not yet installed and in use on the Wakehurst site (consideration of implementation likely to take place within the 2024-25 financial year). It was discussed in interviews with WS3 that the work for the Nature Returns programme makes up a quarter of RBG Kew's 'Nature Unlocked' campaign. Therefore, as well as contributing to the Nature Returns communication campaign RBG Kew will also be doing promotion of the work through their own campaign.

RBG Kew are very experienced in engaging with the public and stakeholders to communicate complex science in interesting ways. One WS3 interviewee noted that they were lucky to have access to peer-to-peer science channels which had a good track record of engagement, and they can use these to build interest from the scientific community. Programme documents show that RBG Kew hosted an internal Nature Returns WS3 science workshop in September 2023 at the Wakehurst site. They also had a visit from the Defra Director-General in October 2023 which included discussion of the WS3 carbon science. RBG Kew are also experienced in citizen science and public campaigns which could be used to communicate the findings and significance of the work of this programme. Programme documentation noted that RBG Kew have shared three videos on their social media relating to the carbon research being undertaken as part of the programme. They have also updated their public facing websites. Additionally, RBG Kew communicate to their engaged corporate audience such as Sky who one interviewee described as 'very interested in the Shared Outcomes Fund' programme and who have provided some top up funding to the mycology team to continue their research around carbon. Communicating with all of these varied audiences will be important to maximise the impact of the programme findings.

Ambition for analysis and dissemination have been revised as a result of the extension to funding and it is likely that more scientific papers and other dissemination tools will be developed in the next phase of the programme. Interviewees from both WS2 and 3 stated that they intend to produce scientific papers with the results of the study for a scientific audience as well as more 'digestible, easy to read' outputs aimed at other audiences such as businesses or NGOs. Programme documents from January 2024 showed that NE were in the process of drafting a scientific paper on chronosequence grassland soils. Data from interviews showed that RBG Kew are increasingly engaging with businesses and policy teams to share their scientific findings and converting the scientific language into more 'business or government speak' with emphasis on benefits to businesses to engage the different audiences.

"The impacts on business and giving them a better understanding of how they might invest in nature. These are quite hard to track, very intangible but businesses are now coming to us [RBG Kew] on the back of this programme and vice versa. We are presenting this programme to business and things are starting to connect together as well." – WS3 interviewee

WS2 interviewees have also stated that they plan to attend conferences to share their findings. Work around this has already begun and programme board meeting minutes show that WS2 gave a presentation in July 2023 about the programme at the Science for Nature Recovery Conference.

It was expressed in interviews by WS2 and 3 that an important output of their work alongside the findings from the carbon data is the methodologies that they have

developed and standardised together. Although this is unlikely to be published in a scientific journal the teams aim to make these publicly available and publicised so that they can be used and contribute to further understanding of carbon across the UK and beyond. This is likely to be part of the next phase of the programme.

Workstream 4

WS4 have run two webinars which cover the topics of 'Governance of blended funding approaches' and 'The aggregation of ecosystem service suppliers'. These webinars were based on findings from commissioned reports for WS4 (reports are published on GFI Investment Readiness Toolkit website) (see section 2).

An online feedback questionnaire was sent to the attendees of the two webinars (see Annex for responses). Of the individuals contacted, eight responded. The small sample size is to be expected given the time between the webinar and delivery of the feedback questionnaire. It also means that the results are open for interpretation and may not reflect the experiences of all attendees.

Of the eight respondents, six were individuals from government/Arms-length bodies (ALBs), one was from a Nature Recovery Project and one from a Consultancy. Three attended both webinars, three attended the Governance of Blended Funding Approaches webinar (14th February 2023) and two attended the Aggregation of Ecosystem Service Suppliers (26th April 2023).

The main motivation for attending (seven respondents) was the webinar's relevance to the attendee's work. One respondent noted that they were involved in the research. The webinar was found to be useful by all except one respondent who found the webinar (Governance of blended funding approaches) to be too theory-based and lacking practical guidance. For those who found the webinars useful several reasons were given, from increasing understanding in this area and hearing about different approaches to helping make contacts with people with shared perspectives, although one respondent noted that the content was quite technical and difficult to take in (Aggregation of Ecosystem Service Suppliers). Of the eight respondents, six had or intended to share the information they had learned as a reference point to seek more information, to develop specific funding profiles, and specifically with the Forestry Commission and other interested parties. For those who had not shared the information, their reasons included that the information was too technical and its presentation dull (Aggregation), and that it failed to address the challenge of blended finance governance (Governance).

Suggestions for improvements to sharing research with the public included having more diagrams as opposed to lots of text in order to maintain interest, having a central library for all information relating to NbS and Natural Capital, a central community of practice to house relevant reports, projects and research across the government bodies, and more engagement to define the research questions ahead of time. Future webinar topics requested included:

- practical implementation of blended finance,
- ways to govern blended finance beyond contracts,
- legislation involved in green finance,
- how to use the aggregation of ecosystem service supplier tools,
- private finance beyond Biodiversity Net Gain and Nutrient Neutrality,
- compatibility of approaches with existing and emerging government schemes, and
- the future needs of buyers of ecosystem service markets.

Additional comments were both positive, describing the webinars as interesting, informative, and well-presented and delivered, to negative, stating that the webinars were hard to engage with and did not provide enough answers to questions on both topics.

A programme partner in an interview stated that the findings and reports produced by WS4 around blended finance are being distributed and discussed more widely within other Defra and ALB teams. WS4 also attended the Nature Finance UK 2023 conference in September 2023 to discuss blended finance with potential investors and promote the research generated by the Nature Returns programme.

Future dissemination

A wide range of stakeholders are thought to be interested in the data from each workstream, and it is largely being shared to date through emails, meetings and events. Going forwards, once data are collected, quality assured and in an accessible format, all partnership projects and workstream partners believe the data should be open access, where possible, and the plans are for it be available on the Access to Evidence site. At present the Governance of Blended Finance and The Aggregation of Ecosystem Service Suppliers reports are available on the site.

The next stage of the evaluation will include a focus on the effectiveness of these communication tools and look to identify other stakeholders who could benefit from the data and findings generated by the Nature Returns programme.

Partnership project activities

Interview and survey data emphasise that at this stage of the programme the main outreach activities currently taking place are being conducted by the project teams. These are in the form of awareness campaigns to showcase the activities taking place and planned within the partnership project sites. Outreach at the partnership project level involves working with a range of landholders and land managers, volunteers, members of the local community, educational establishments and researchers, local authorities and NGOs. The stakeholders engaged with to date reflect the immediate needs of the partnership projects and workstreams to undertake their activities and conduct research, and monitoring.

For some partnership projects, prioritisation of habitat creation came at the expense of comprehensive dissemination of the project's activities. One project team expressed that little has been done to date to share the project's work wider than the organisation and key stakeholders but that a monitoring report, which would bring various surveys and findings together from across the project, is expected to be a key resource in communicating what the project is doing more widely. For others, considerable effort to disseminate information about the project has been made within their local community including schools, community and volunteer groups, universities, local councils and parishes, libraries and special interest groups (see below for more detail so for community engagement activities). Many felt that communications were important to address misinformation being spread and to inform the public on what nature restoration looks like and what the benefits are.

Efforts to share the partnership projects' work include:

- local talks and presentations,
- project press releases,
- actively reaching out to members of the farming community,
- website development and updates,
- short films and posts to social media,
- on-site interpretation signs to explain habitat works and management,

- development of a habitat creation toolkit for Parish Councils,
- and features on local news television programmes: BBC Look North in May 2023 and BBC East Midlands Today in November 2023.

There are plans, for some partnership projects, to use end of year project reports, evaluations and monitoring documents to circulate information to all stakeholders and have them available to members of the public.

Going forwards partnership projects and programme partners expressed an ambition to make stakeholder engagement more strategic, identifying the stakeholders who will raise the profile and enhance the impact of the programme and who have the power to make changes based on the evidence the programme has collected.

Nature Returns Communication Campaign

The programme level communications campaign is made up of two areas of work. Firstly, the design of branding was contracted out to Johnson Banks in May 2023 and managed by RBG Kew. This aspect involved the design of branding materials, representative images for each of the partnership projects and development of a communications toolkit. Secondly, Natural England's dedicated communications resource aims to provide strategy around communications, supports development and sign off of content and managing risks around communications.

Much of the communications tools and guidance along with clarity on the process for partnership projects and delivery partners to gain NE approval on communications has been provided after programme initiation and is still ongoing. For example, programme documents show that a communications toolkit and guidance on videos and campaigns was finalised and shared in January 2024. Additionally, in the programme workshop some programme leads shared that they felt there has been insufficient communication considering the size, scale, and importance of the Nature Returns programme. The lack of visibility and clarity in communication may hinder the program's ability to effectively engage stakeholders and convey its achievements and objectives.

Branding and communications materials

The overarching programme level communications materials are designed to be used by the workstreams, other delivery partners such as the Forestry Commission, and the project teams. One interviewee from WS1 stated that the products will be able to be used freely by the partnership projects and that the idea is that the Nature Returns communication campaign will have a life beyond the programme with project teams able to use it for other relevant NbS and blended finance projects. Programme documentation from December 2023 shows that each workstream was developing an engagement plan, linked to the overall programme objectives. which will tie in with the Nature Returns communication campaign.

The Nature Returns campaign was said to have been little used by project teams to date apart from branding in project information boards at events. This is partly due to the branding work only being signed off in November 2023, meaning there has been little time to use the materials at the time of writing. Some project teams felt that there was considerable work to be done on monitoring, market research and evidence gathering before the brand could be used more significantly. One team indicated that they would like to use the communication tools and resources as part of Nature Returns but were unclear as to how, requesting a clear steer from the programme team on communication outputs from the project. Another project team had requested programme communications resources from Natural England early on, which were not provided. They then created their own resources so when Nature Returns was launched, they had

already set up their own strategy and did not feel a need to use the new material. In addition, two teams have raised concerns around the name “Nature Returns”. Some individuals felt it undermined efforts from farmers already working to protect nature, and that it suggested that nature is not there already. The dissatisfaction extends to other terms such as ‘nature recovery’ and ‘rewilding’ suggesting that there is sensitivity around these sorts of topics, often viewed as anti-farming. For these reasons the partnership project in question has chosen to make limited use of the Nature Returns communication campaign materials. This is supported by programme documents which show that the Natural England communications team edited a press release for this partnership project and added in the recommended boilerplate text about the Nature Returns programme. Another team described that the link the name makes between the finance side and the nature side of the project is too subtle and not recognised by those outside of the programme. Additionally, one project team felt that the visual produced to represent their partnership project was not as strong as others and would have appreciated more opportunities to feedback on this.

Communications resource and planning

Programme documentation shows that resource within the communications team has been tight and had to be reactive due to the need for managing partnership project communications and programme communications whilst communications plans were being developed. The setting up of the communications team later in the programme timeline has added to this pressure. Programme documents show that the tight resource means that planning and monitoring of communications are being ‘retro-fit’ as it was not done during the launch phase. The change in programme manager during the launch phase of the Nature Returns campaign added to the challenges around this time as it affected the signing off of key decisions and outputs. A full delivery plan was not yet complete at the time of writing (February 2024). Documents show that the communications team were considering and aiming to work more closely with the programme steering group to increase shared accountability for communications and provide stronger direction for future communications.

Programme documents from December 2023 show that the Nature Returns communication team was working with the NE partnership project advisers to develop milestones for the partnership projects to meet before the end of the contract in March 2024. This shows that more planning is starting to take place within the communications team with more of a steer given to the partnership projects around communications. One WS1 interviewee was uncertain, however, over how the assets created will be managed or owned once the programme ends. Programme documents confirm this as communications meeting minutes show queries over the copyrights of each of the partners to images used in the campaign. It is clear that the communications package is still in development and programme leads acknowledged in the programme workshop that there were inefficiencies within the communications campaign.

Challenges to communications

In the programme workshop programme leads reflected that the programme’s aim to be innovative and work flexibly were constrained by government systems and bureaucracy.

Programme documents show that strategic decisions had to be made around whether content was published on the .gov website or on the Natural England blog pages. The .gov website requires a lengthier sign off process and has very specific rules on what can be published and in what format whereas the Natural England blog pages are much more flexible and efficient to publish content on but possibly get less exposure. Interview data with WS1 individuals shows that in preparing a press release for the .gov website to

announce the partnership projects, some 26 individuals had to be consulted for approval before it could go to the senior leadership team at Natural England, including the programme partners, partnership projects, and Defra's comms and press office. This is the challenge of working in an ALB and with multiple sponsors, partners and partnership projects. Interviewees emphasised that in creating content there are a number of considerations such as the exposure and desire for profile from each organisation and getting the wording and narrative consistent. Interviewees mentioned that in order to overcome these challenges the use of Microsoft Teams was encouraged to allow collaboration and input on a single document and getting as much of the detail finalised within the programme team before being sent further up the chain. It was found that the time and resources needed to coordinate communications work and create materials was generally underestimated. This could have implications for the number of communications and dissemination products that can be produced and released within the time remaining in the programme, limiting what can realistically be achieved.

Two partnership projects also reported frustration around the process of releasing project updates to the public and approving outputs. The project teams feel that these sorts of communications should have a simple sign-off process to keep the timeliness of the communication. They have found that the full sign off process through Natural England can take weeks which can reduce the impact of communication as the output may then be out of date. In addition, one project team member stated the need for standardising communications across the partnership projects despite their differences in scope, management prescriptions and location:

"Providing standardisation for engagement is essential as public involvement in projects such as this can only help with awareness raising and general consideration of the environmental challenges we face. In addition, involvement gives the public the opportunity to feel that they are contributing to offsetting carbon emissions and possibly having a positive impact on accelerating climate change. Standardised requirements for engagement with more stringent targets would allow this project to produce robust science as an outcome, but also ensure communities were informed about how to get involved in local action." – project team respondent to the online survey

Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement has mostly been conducted by the partnership projects at this stage. Engagement has centred around engaging with land managers and communities to enable habitat restoration and creation works. There has also been some programme level engagement with policy makers, although this is largely planned for the following year of the programme. Engagement carried out by WS4 with investors and partnership project partnerships is discussed in section 3 on blended finance.

5.2. In what ways have partnership projects engaged with local landowners both directly and indirectly involved in the partnership project (where appropriate to partnership project structure)? What approaches worked/ didn't work? For whom and why?

For some partnership projects, relationships with land managers have been critical to the success of their project. Some have developed these relationships over many years and in relation to other areas of work. Many, however, felt that the tight timelines, in the application process and with which to deliver habitat works, left little time to engage, share understanding, discuss options with and provide reassurance to land managers. As such, where land managers are involved in the partnership projects, they are largely

already environmentally minded, which is thought to contribute to positive working relationships.

Interviews with land managers found their motivations for participating in the project encompassed:

- The project being an opportune way to achieve landscape change that they were planning to do anyway.
- There being benefits of being involved in a project wider than their own land which also included significant monitoring efforts and peer-to-peer learning opportunities.
- The opportunity to be a pioneer and showcase a way forward under the changing farm subsidy system.
- The proposed works being a good fit with their AES or other environmental work.

The benefits of being involved in the partnership projects for land managers was reported as improved understanding of nature-based solutions. One land manager specifically commented that the focus on nature-based solutions from government bodies and other funders has caused them to look at their land in different ways and to identify areas which may be better suited to nature restoration than farming:

“I was aware of it [NbS] before, but then when you see where these sort of funding funds are coming from and what they’re applicable to, then you do start looking at your farm in different ways. And when you go around stock looking at places and you think, that’s an area that’s an awkward, you know, you should really start thinking about these things now and then maybe even bigger scale of what could be done.”- Partnership project land manager interviewee

One partnership project found their third-party governance model to be an effective way of engaging land managers as it enabled land manager participation but with overarching management and oversight of activities on a catchment scale. Regular meetings with all involved parties were said to have helped develop a full understanding and shared vision of what was being delivered across the project.

Project teams reported that working with land managers can have its challenges. In one instance, working with a landowner has led to the project team having to take on additional responsibilities, advising landowners not just on the project but on stewardship and grazing agreements. To overcome this challenge, one project team contracted a farm adviser to oversee the impact of the project on AES agreements for the land managers. Where a single partnership project lead organisation is the owner of the land there was said to be more freedom to make choices based wholly on the organisation’s own aims and aspirations.

Barriers to working with land managers and farmers were linked to differing beliefs and goals. One partnership project organisation found that the wider organisation’s work, specifically around badger vaccinations and the TB endemic, a sensitive subject for some farming stakeholders, made communication and building a trusting relationship difficult. Efforts have been made to engage land managers in a farming-sensitive way and showcase how nature interventions can work alongside productive agriculture.

5.3. In what ways have partnership projects engaged with local stakeholders such as volunteers, community groups and wider stakeholders? What approaches worked/ didn't work? For whom and why?

Partnership projects, particularly those with a dedicated Community and Engagement Officer, have made significant efforts to engage with the local community. For some partnership projects, however, higher than anticipated delivery demands and lack of dedicated engagement resources or staff, has somewhat limited their community and engagement work. In addition, where partnership projects are particularly remote or only working on a single estate there is less opportunity for community engagement since the landscape may be hard to access. Here the quality of engagement with the community was said to be more important than the number of people at each event. Most of the partnership projects noted that the engagement side of their work was important and should be enhanced going forwards.

Overall partnership projects are engaging with communities in a variety of ways, including:

Events

- Public tree planting days
- School walks, talks and visits
- Family activity days
- Major donors' event and guided walk

Talks and presentations

- Community consultations prior to habitat works and ongoing involvement of the community in decision making
- Presentations at parish council meetings
- Talks at local universities
- Expert talks on various topics
- Displays at local shows
- Talks on natural flood management at local flood meetings

Volunteering

- Weekly volunteer sessions and volunteer work parties
- GroWet Campaign– initiative for volunteers to grow and establish wetland plants
- Training community and volunteers in green skills

Media

- Updates on local community Facebook groups, local websites, magazines and newsletters
- Features on local news television programmes: BBC Look North in May 2023 and BBC East Midlands Today in November 2023.

Arts

- Photography walks led by a professional photographer and culminating in a semi-permanent photography exhibition
- Activities for volunteers to engage with the project through poetry or artwork
- Children's arts and crafts event

Other

- Visits from and with local agricultural colleges

- Engaging with local residents with disabilities to discuss how the site can better suit their needs
- Making project sites more accessible to the public
- Informal conversations with passersby (said to be important to garner local support)
- Invitations to neighbouring communities to see the work being done
- Contracting local businesses and experts

5.4. To what extent and how have the partnership projects been successful in engaging and building relationships with local communities (increasing social capital) and wider stakeholders?

Participants, volunteers and local community members generally found engagement activities to be beneficial. Some discussed how walks and talks were informative and led to increased knowledge and skills. Some felt that the events organised, though helpful, were largely engaging people already environmentally minded and that more needed to be done to engage people who aren't aware or supportive of NbS.

Interactions with the local community in terms of explaining and showcasing the project were found to have helped its positive reception. Instances where land remained in production rather than going solely to rewilding, where land was marginal and where land was already owned by the partnership project organisation were also more positively received. Building community connection and trust, by listening to people, understanding their concerns, and trying to address them where possible, was important from the beginning and throughout the projects. Increasing public access was also found to generate more interest and support for the partnership projects. One project team found that where there was less community engagement, it was more difficult to carry out the work due to there being less volunteers.

A lack of diversity in those engaged either through events or volunteering was discussed as limiting the spread and support for NbS. Finding ways to engage with economically deprived families or those out of work was identified as a particular opportunity. Most volunteering opportunities are on weekdays which limits the potential audience. One partnership project added drop-in volunteer sessions and posted events on Eventbrite, which helped to bring in local students to volunteer. This was said to be beneficial for students to learn practical skills tied to habitat restoration and for the volunteer groups in that age diversity is increased.

Negative reception of the partnership projects generally occurred where:

- There was a history of poor communication and responsiveness between local residents and the partnership project organisation, found to be helped by involving an organisation with more positive links to the public as a buffer.
- False information was being spread around, for example, the landscape being altered, or farmers being displaced. Effective social media and local engagement strategies were said to be the best way to counter this.
- There was limited public access and public right of way preventing people from benefitting from and learning about the landscape.
- High-grade arable land, with its own ecology and species composition, was being removed from production, rather than locating the project on marginal land. This was a particular concern for those from the farming community with a particular interest and stake in national food security and self-sufficiency goals.

- The physical changes to features in the landscape, as a result of habitat works, do not fit with community members' memories or preferences.

5.5. In what ways have communities affected (either positively or negatively) delivery of the partnership projects, how?

As part of the evaluation, communities were asked what benefits have resulted from their engagement in the partnership projects. These included:

- Community education by project officers on the biodiversity, ecology and history of the landscape led to a greater awareness and appreciation of the local area and its nature.
- Education and engagement of school children through site visits and activities, and school visits are expected to lead to ongoing appreciation of nature restoration and dispersion of knowledge from children to adults/peers. Appreciation of tangible local actions to tackle local issues such as flooding were particularly highlighted as a benefit as the children are aware of climate change but don't often have tangible examples of how they can make a practical difference.
- Volunteers were seen to be engaged more deeply in the activities through being part of the delivery team and contributing to/being consulted on decisions. This was said to increase pride in their work and motivation.
- Engagement opportunities allowed participants to meet new people, to connect with their local community and local area, and inspired their own land management projects at home.
- Positive, tangible and visible changes to the landscape were seen as good nature PR.
- Volunteering opportunities were found to improve participants' mental health and wellbeing and increasing public access, which many volunteers were involved in, is expected to bring these benefits to community residents.
- Skills, which volunteers had learnt, such as dead hedging, were utilised elsewhere such as in the volunteer's own gardens.
- Knowledge shared by the partnership projects, through site visits, was in one case, being used to create habitat in a neighbouring village.
- In one project, the project team engaged with local communities around improving flood management practices and management of land for biodiversity.
- Volunteers experienced an increase in nature connectedness such that in one project volunteers helped to grow wetland plants at home and then established them in the natural landscape.

The Landscape Modelling and Mapping Tool is thought by one WS3 respondent to have potential to incorporate data from the partnership projects on cultural ecosystem services and social impacts. To explore NbS-related benefits for communities, the University of Sussex have drafted a paper on cultural ecosystem services, their importance, how they can be measured and understood, and what the current situation is for Nature-based Solutions in the UK. Modelling visuals and maps are anticipated to aid in stakeholder engagement, potentially helping to bridge communication gaps and illustrate the need for change in land use practices.

5.6. To what extent and how have programme partners been successful in engaging and building relationships with wider stakeholders?

The agencies involved in the programme are seen as trusted intermediaries so hold power in engaging and influencing the land management community, environmental NGOs and Defra.

There are numerous ways in which the programme feels that they can engage with policy and wider Defra teams to further the work of the programme. Some activities have started to take place in this regard, but more engagement is likely to take place once the scientific results are available. The specific audiences, their interests and the best ways to engage them will be explored through interviews and workshops in the next phase of the evaluation.

This report finds that the programme has a unique opportunity given programme partners roles in their agencies to have discussions with Natural England's Green Finance Working Group, around Defra's Green Finance Strategy and the Task Force on Nature-related Financial Disclosures. As an example, the Environment Agency though WS4 is actively feeding into a Defra Green Finance, Flood and Water Transformation Roadmap. Immediate conversations will likely be within partner organisations on how they can capitalise on the findings of the programme. Programme documents show that the partners envision the evidence generated from the programme to inform policy such as Environmental Land Management schemes, the Nature Recovery Network, the Local Nature Recovery strategies, UK environmental markets and the UK Greenhouse Gas Inventory.

Interview data suggests that WS3 are confident that the data and methodologies that they are producing will feed into UK policy as they help to build a more accurate national picture of how carbon is stored in our landscapes. This is in addition to the current work that they are already doing with the Forestry Commission to review the carbon codes. As well as reviewing the algorithms and assumptions behind the UK carbon codes WS3 are also testing their data against global carbon algorithms to progress the UK's methodological capability for reporting our carbon storage and other carbon data in a standardised way that will be comparable to other nations. Programme documents such as steering group meeting minutes show that RBG Kew are already hosting policy teams such as the Defra Environmental Land Management Schemes teams to discuss how the programme evidence can feed into their work.

One policy stakeholder interviewee suggested that the findings of the Nature Returns programme would be best presented at topic specific Defra group workshop days. The interviewee gave an example of a knowledge exchange workshop run by EA which the interviewee found to be particularly beneficial. The interviewee would like more workshop days like this to be run across the Defra group as they identified that there is a large number of similar projects being run without enough information sharing. A knowledge exchange format is beneficial as it allows for discussion and follow up questions as well as networking across policy teams. Therefore, a day dedicated to NbS or blended finance which includes presentations from the Nature Returns programme alongside other similar projects would be welcomed. Additionally, the Nature Returns team could consider sharing progress and findings at a 'lunch and learn' session where a presentation is broadcast across Defra. The policy stakeholder interviewee stated that the 'lunch and learn' sessions were one of the main ways they heard about the work of other projects.

This report finds that there is opportunity for conversation with policymakers on how realistic nature-based solutions are in the broader policy landscape and how the experiences of this programme can inform policy decisions. Now is the time for

programme partners to plan strategically in terms of who the audience is, how they are best engaged with and what the overarching messages and asks will be.

Recommendations

- Partners could undertake further stakeholder and audience mapping to ensure the right people are being engaged with and their interests and favoured methods of engagement are understood before communications work takes place.
- Future communication of commissioned research may benefit from engaging with intended audiences ahead of time to ensure it is relevant and in an appropriate format and making presentations more interactive and practical-focused.
- A comprehensive and mutually agreed communications plan including milestones, expected outputs, opportunities for collaboration should be finalised ahead of evidence being available. Clear expectations and guidelines should be laid out for all delivery partners and project teams.
- Increased integration between partnership projects and programme partners around land manager and community engagement would help partners to understand the barriers NbS projects face and how to increase wider support as well as help to identify areas where partners can support project team communications.
- Project teams should, going forwards, reflect on community and stakeholder engagement to date, and use knowledge of what has or has not worked well to develop strategic engagement plans for the next phase of the programme.

Next steps for the evaluation

- Explore the impact of programme and partnership project communications for a range of stakeholders.
- Discuss with policymakers their evidence needs, preferred methods of engagement and reflections on the programme to date.
- Understand the best ways in which the programme can communicate with the different types of stakeholders to maximise impact of the programme.
- Through workshops with programme partners, better understand how they are coordinating communications and dissemination efforts, and what this might mean for the potential legacy of the programme in terms of ensuring ongoing access to evidence and learning.

6. Capturing outcomes

This section explores how programme and partnership project progress and outcomes are being measured and reported.

Guiding evaluation questions
Process <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What approaches are being used to measure changes? (carbon, biodiversity, ecosystem services, community and stakeholder engagement, blended finance)
Extent to which evaluation questions can be answered
Illustrative evidence provides answer to the question of what is being monitored and how outcomes are being captured but less so on whether they are effective and can be improved.
Strength of evidence <i>(for the findings presented)</i>
Mixed findings combined with partial completion of data collection tools limits the strength of evidence.
Research tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnership project case studies (n=6) Programme monitoring documents (n=556) Partnership project and workstream monitoring survey (n=8)

Key findings

- Ambition to monitor and record progress for individual partnership projects and workstreams is high and many teams have made considerable progress in collecting informative and useful data.
- Partnership projects and workstreams vary in their capacity to monitor, the extent of their monitoring activities and the specific metrics they are measuring.
- Partnership project monitoring activities have been hampered somewhat by initial delays to their start and a lack of guidance on what to monitor.
- There is opportunity for data collection, while extensive and rigorous, to be planned and coordinated centrally across the whole programme, which could lead to opportunities to collaborate further and compare metrics across workstreams and the partnership projects.
- Comparative assessments of the outcomes across the partnership projects could be particularly powerful in communicating the importance of NbS approaches.

6.1 What approaches are being used to measure changes? (carbon, biodiversity, ecosystem services, community and stakeholder engagement, blended finance)

Monitoring

Activities to monitor habitat creation and restoration, carbon storage and sequestration, gas flux and other outcomes of the habitat works are largely underway although to

varying degrees of intensity and scope. Data are being collected either in-house by project teams, through Natural England's field team or by consultants and volunteers, managed by partnership project organisations.

Carbon (as well as vegetation surveys) at partnership project site locations is being monitored by the WS2 Natural England team. Having a single team collect carbon data across all six partnership projects was intended to ensure consistency. Going forwards, partnership projects, to increase the impact of their work and increase their ability to educate and influence local stakeholders will need access to this data in a format they can use. To ensure the long-term programme objective of adding to the carbon evidence base is met:

- Partnership projects must be trained to conduct ongoing carbon monitoring (over the ten-year period) and/or
- Natural England must conduct repeat surveys over the same period.

There is not, to ICF's knowledge, a shared drive across the whole programme although Natural England's Access to Evidence site will house some of the programme's outputs.

Partnership project monitoring approaches

All of the project teams as well as some land managers are keen to conduct in-depth monitoring, believing that a solid evidence base will encourage support for the project and lead to further NbS projects. One project team member stating,

"having that visual impact on the ground and then also having an expert coming around and saying this is now attracting X, Y and Z. All those little stories help build trust in the project." – Project team interviewee

One partnership project organisation, who have the capacity to monitor, have made monitoring a significant component of the project, capturing baseline conditions, covering all major species groups, soils and capture imagery. They have engaged external partners, community members and/or volunteers to assist monitoring efforts. This has taken considerable coordination but the benefit in opportunities to upskill and engage with communities and in being able to undertake more monitoring was found to outweigh the costs. They have used the project to invest in the equipment needed and develop expertise in monitoring through training days with professional surveyors involving staff, volunteers and experts, they hope to be able to continue monitoring into the future.

For some partnership projects, the need to deliver habitat creation and restoration targets quickly and the late issue of contracts has limited monitoring activities with some baseline surveys having to be postponed to the "next optimum survey season" or being conducted in sub-optimal periods. Unfavourable weather conditions were also mentioned by some of the partnership projects leading to difficulties in monitoring and additional work required in maintaining/managing created habitats, which took resource away from developing a monitoring programme. One project team member noted that:

"arranging an appropriate level of baseline surveys within the seasonal requirements and project timeframe has been challenging and has delayed the implementation of some project outcomes". – Project team interviewee

In addition, uncertainty around the metrics that programme workstreams would be leading on meant that there was hesitancy in developing overlapping monitoring projects.

Similarly, several of the project teams discussed a need for more guidance on monitoring to, for example, help build robust sustainable finance models. Teams felt that further guidance could have helped to ensure greater consistency across the partnership projects allowing for comparison and a clearer overall picture of programme impact. It was suggested by several teams that having a set of KPIs and monitoring requirements

for all six of the partnership projects early in the programme would have helped teams confirm that they had set adequate monitoring processes in place. One team reflected that while they have compiled evaluation and logic models to help monitor activities this will only reflect individual progress.

Monitoring methods and metrics

The metrics, methods and frequency of monitoring data are largely individual to the workstream and partnership projects, informed by individual objectives and the partnership projects' work on previous projects such as Plymouth City Council's GCRF project and Derbyshire Wildlife Trust's Derwent Connections projects. Survey results in the Annex show the outputs and outcomes being monitored for each partnership project and workstream. It should be noted that this table is not complete. Workstream 3 and the one of the project teams were not able to fill out the survey, some of the other surveys were only partially filled, and further monitoring capacity and skills have since been developed.

Should data vary considerably (e.g., type/unit), it may be difficult to uniformly link the work of the partnership projects to their outcomes, and thereby limit broader learning for future NbS.

There may be, given the appetite of project teams to enhance their monitoring but dependent on the capacity of those project teams more advanced in their monitoring, an opportunity to share best practice within project teams through partnership project forums and informal contact.

Monitoring stakeholder engagement and effective dissemination

All the partnership projects and workstreams, bar WS2, which has a science-focus, are monitoring their community engagement, albeit through different metrics. Metrics recording the number of events, attendance at events, social media engagement, visitor numbers, volunteer numbers and hours, and community engagement and feedback, could be standardised at least across the partnership projects to allow for easier comparison. Several of the projects felt they need guidance on how to capture communications and engagement progress in an effective and efficient way. In addition, progress on blended finance, now that the objectives of WS4 are clearer, could be measured as, for example:

- Conversations with investors/relevant stakeholders (number of conversations, stakeholder, outcomes of conversation)
- Development/use of strategic funding plan
- Identification of funding opportunities

Going forwards several project teams have outlined plans to continue or enhance monitoring effort. Guidance from partners and scientific research institutions was requested from teams relating to understanding the outcomes useful to central learning to achieve the evidence base required for securing green finance and the analysis of data collected.

UK CEH findings on monitoring effectiveness

UK CEH completed an analysis of a sample of programme documentation including details of WS2 monitoring plans and partnership project monitoring plans. The full analysis is included as a separate Annex to this report (sign posted in Annex 2).

Overall, UK CEH found that a clear considerable monitoring effort was underway across the programme inclusive of WS2 and 3 as well as the six partnership projects. They noted

that WS2 appear to be collecting the right data with good practice methods for carbon storage, sequestration and biodiversity assessments. However, it was felt that more detail could be given on selection and comparability of chrono sequence sites, and the spatial and temporal resolution of monitoring through the restoration period. Also, for WS2 it was suggested that more detail could be given to describe what specific 'wider benefits' they are monitoring/ expect to change. Currently this explanation only goes as far as stating that vegetation surveys will take place.

UK CEH picked up on a number of other aspects that could be measured and monitored to achieve a fuller picture of the impact of nature-based solutions. These included measurements on nitrous oxide, consideration of freshwater monitoring as it is a key carbon loss pathway, and generally more monitoring of water systems for changes in quality and water retention. Additionally, the lack of inclusion of control or reference sites in the documentation was noted and it was suggested that this should be made more explicit. Additionally, across the workstreams and partnership projects UK CEH feel that there could be more standardisation of reporting in order to effectively assess outcomes for carbon and biodiversity.

While more detailed workstream methods were provided by WS3, due to time constraints this information was unable to be included in this report. UK CEH felt some data supplied to them regarding WS3 was too high-level.

UK CEH identified a number of areas that could be considered by the programme for future monitoring when aiming to quantify NbS outcomes:

- Restoration chronology and experimental design: Most important here is to explain the use of before, after, control, intervention or space for time approaches in order to discern a specific effect of the NbS on the indicator being monitored.
- Temporal resolution of monitoring: What is the time period across which monitoring will occur, and the return intervals for sampling within this period?
- Spatial resolution of monitoring: How many monitoring locations have been established within a given land parcel (and its designated control/reference site) and how do these relate to the restoration plans? This is particularly relevant to the partnership projects.
- Indicators e.g., carbon storage, carbon sequestration, biodiversity: What are the priority indicators for reporting NbS effects?
- Methods for each indicator
 - o Measurement type: General measurement principle
 - o Methodology: How it will be applied in the specific partnership project/ workstream setting

Progress reporting

All the partnership projects and workstreams are monitoring progress through progress reports. Project teams complete monthly, quarterly and end of year progress reports containing increasing amounts of information (Table 6.1).

Table 6.1 - Partnership project progress report contents (N.B. Green finance is to be included in quarterly reports from March 2024)

Progress report	Monthly	Quarterly	End of Year
Topics of reporting	Overview of progress	Overview of progress	Overview of progress

Progress report	Monthly	Quarterly	End of Year
	Progress against milestones	Progress against milestones	Progress against milestones
	Risks	Risks	Risks
		Funding & match funding	Funding & match funding
		Habitats created/ restored (Area/ length)	Project evaluation assessment
			Weaknesses and threats to M&E
			Green finance

The overview of progress section provides a rich qualitative description of a variety of activities happening at the partnership project level. There is also scope to include reporting requirements on lessons learnt, where partnership projects have faced and managed challenges, perhaps linked to the risk log and to track community and stakeholder engagement. It is noted that a section on the amount of community engagement has been recently added to the quarterly monitoring report and a green finance section to be added in the near-term. Data collected is largely qualitative and most sections are not prescriptive in the information to include, allowing for flexibility to adapt the report to different partnership projects but perhaps lacking consistency in the information collected. Sections might benefit from more direction through specific questions e.g., what data have you been collecting, how is it being used, what have been the challenges etc. partnership projects.

Programme partners use quarterly reports as updates on partnership project progress towards achieving habitat delivery targets as well as details of public engagement (e.g. number of people engaged and volunteers recruited). To date, discussions are ongoing between NE's social science and impact teams to discern how the information collected in quarterly reports can be best used. It is intended by programme partners that the habitat creation data will be used to assess cost per hectare of creation restoration, which can be compared across projects for similar habitats. Currently, there is some data available on this work, though a more complete version will be completed at the end of 2023/24 once all reports have been received.

It was noted in interviews that the reporting process for partnership projects, particularly those inexperienced in large-grant funding, was found to be challenging. One project team noted in the survey that a portal, akin to the GRCF PowerApp, might make the reporting process smoother and speed up the sharing of the results of monitoring activities. The reporting mechanism and template were said by one project team to be ill-suited to the project and its activities. Reconciling different organisations' approach to reporting was found to be challenging and time consuming. An example given was that the requirement to provide a percentage of how advanced the project is was found to be difficult given that work consists of multiple activities occurring on multiple habitats each with their own timelines. Other project teams noted the change in reporting forms, which took time to become familiar with.

Workstreams and the Forestry Commission complete monthly highlight reports containing information on what has happened in the period, what will happen next, current risks and issues, and a budget overview. Going forwards capturing outputs, publications, events and conversations with stakeholders will be important for measuring impact, engagement and dissemination being key areas of work for the next year. Space to list opportunities for collaboration with other programme partners and partnership projects, and

opportunities for dissemination may stimulate thinking about where these opportunities can be identified and pursued.

Recommendations

- Develop a set of indicators for the projects on measurement of progress on blended finance.
- Decide on a set of metrics for community and stakeholder engagement and knowledge dissemination for workstreams and the partnership projects.
- Explore how Natural England can conduct repeat surveys and how project teams can monitor ecosystem services beyond the end of the programme and how this data can be aggregated, shared and used by the project teams and wider audience.
- Progress reporting is already taking place but could be modified to include more on lessons learned, tracking of communications and stakeholder engagement and include a more detailed understanding of monitoring activities taking place.
- Facilitate sharing between project teams on monitoring best practices.

Next steps for the evaluation

- Explore, in line with the programme's objectives for the next year, a set of indicators with which to measure short-term progress.
- Explore ways in which ongoing monitoring and reporting data can be collated to programme level.
- Investigate how knowledge exchanges between partnership projects can facilitate enhanced monitoring efforts.

7. Conclusions and forward planning

This evaluation period has evidenced early and emerging outcomes from the programme, which indicate areas in which the programme is likely to meet and even exceed their objectives as well as opportunities to improve the working and impact of the programme. These will be explored further in the next phase of the evaluation.

Overall conclusions:

- All workstreams and partnership projects within the programme have made good progress towards their aims and are set to meet their objectives within the programme period including large areas of habitat creation and restoration, and potentially substantial contributions to the carbon sequestration and storage evidence base and knowledge of blended finance.
- For some workstreams and partnership projects, objectives have had to be revised. It is these revised aims and objectives that will be met by March 2024 rather than the objectives set out during programme design. WS4 has revised the scope of the blended finance work with the partnership projects due to the differing base knowledge and organisational set ups for each of the partnership project lead organisations. Revisions have also been made in light of the extension to funding, particularly for WS2 and WS3 as the teams are extending their data collection and will begin data analysis later than originally planned. This may impact the scope and effectiveness of engagement activities.
- Difficulties securing land manager commitment to projects, lack of public support for specific works, disagreements on how best to manage certain habitats and new understanding of more effective ways to carry out habitat creation and restoration have led to changes in scope for some of the partnership project's habitat works with an 11% reduction in area of planned habitat works for the first year.
- Some early outcomes, such as increased collaboration between delivery partners and visual landscape change, are evident but the majority of the programme's outcomes will become apparent in the longer term (10 years +). Working in the natural environment requires continuity of approach, funding to ensure meaningful change and monitoring to understand progress and impact.
- The biggest challenge reported by workstreams, and the partnership projects has been working with the Defra Group's financial processes which encompasses both the financial delays at the initiation of the programme and the lengthy process required for approving financial change requests for partnership project works. These initial delays led to the addition of data collection at chrono sequence sites in WS2 to mitigate risks arising from the delays in partnership project procurement. The delays also reduced the time available for all workstreams to carry out the planned activities from 2.5 to 2 years.
- Timelines for awarding of funding and approving financial change requests do not effectively consider the seasonal and weather-dependent nature of habitat and monitoring works. More consideration needs to be given to how to align the financial timelines of the programme with projects to ensure that habitat creation and restoration activities can be completed during optimal periods to maximise the chance for successful establishment. There is a need for greater flexibility and improved financial/ procurement procedures within government agencies to ensure that they are effectively delivering for nature.
- Collaborative efforts among the delivery partners have been valuable in addressing challenges, and clear ways of working have been established and embedded by WS1.

Partners report contentment with the frequency and types of communication used and programme management by WS1. However, there could be more updates on activities and sharing of findings between the workstreams to maximise the impact of the programme. This is likely to occur more often in the next stage as more findings become available.

- It was generally felt that the partnership projects selected for funding represent a good basis for testing how NbS can work in practice as they cover a good (but not exhaustive) range of habitat types, include different habitat interventions, use different governance models and include a range of partners.
- The evaluation has found that the partnership projects have worked best where:
 - they include pre-existing relationships with landowners and land managers who are environmentally minded,
 - the habitat creation and restoration work builds on a strong landscape scale vision. This is said to motivate the team to create personal connections with those outside the organisation to increase knowledge and create impact beyond the partnership project,
 - teams take the time to engage with stakeholders in a number of ways and build relationships with local communities, farming stakeholders and volunteers to increase maintenance and sustainability of the work and increase knowledge of NbS approaches,
 - there is a clear understanding of the benefits of blended finance and strong organisational motivation to work to develop opportunities for partnerships and financing,
 - programme support is developed to suit individual project needs and project teams have a trusted point of contact, in the form of the partnership project advisers, who can provide bespoke guidance,
 - there is strong, solutions focused project management, trust between team members and clear divisions of responsibilities,
 - teams utilise pre-existing local connections to procure the best local expertise and build support.
- To date, dissemination of the programme's activities and outputs has been limited. Sharing programme learning with relevant government departments and wider interested organisations will be crucial for generating broader impact across carbon science, blended finance and NbS. The Nature Returns communication campaign can play an important role in ensuring the reach of communications but programme partners must develop an effective communications strategy detailing how they will interact with different stakeholders, what the outcomes of these interactions will be and how they will determine if it has been effective.

Following on from this, [recommendations](#) for ways in which NbS programmes and projects can improve and considerations for the next year include:

- Exploring how data collection could occur on a longer timescale so as to evidence the impact of habitat creation and restoration, including through extended funding or training of partnership project teams. Continuing to monitor carbon storage and sequestration in partnership project habitats over time is essential to growing the understanding of the value of NbS approaches and how to design NbS projects.

- Decoupling NbS project funding from habitat creation and restoration completion dates through longer term and flexible public or private funding would improve planning of habitat works, which in turn would improve establishment and survival of newly created or restored habitat and reduce the burden to maintain it.
- Exploring funding options that allow longer project development and planning phases to encompass greater consultation with communities, involvement of experts and discussions with funders about grant requirements prior to delivery.
- Exploring ways in which workstreams can enhance their work with the partnership projects, bringing together research, through the development of the modelling and mapping tool for example, and creating useful resources to enhance collaboration, through the Nature Returns campaign, for example. This could also include facilitating forums, workshops and events to share information across programme partners and partnership projects and co-developing plans for the legacy of the programme.
- Providing greater guidance to partnership projects on monitoring, communications and requirements for the next funding period, taking into account the bespoke requirements of each project with the significant opportunity to have collective impact.
- Increasing integration between partnership projects and programme partners around land manager and community engagement to help partners to understand the barriers NbS projects face and identify areas where partners can support project team communications. Community and stakeholder engagement to date should inform strategic engagement plans going forward.
- Exploring how to effectively share, communicate and use the evidence generated by the programme on carbon storage, landscape mapping, knowledge of blended finance, and practical approaches to habitat restoration. Sharing should occur:
 - between workstreams, for example sharing carbon data with EA and Forestry Commission partners working on blended finance,
 - with partnership projects, who can use findings and knowledge to support their work and develop monitoring and finance strategies, and
 - with the range of tools, and stakeholders for which the evidence may be of use to such as updating the carbon codes, Carbon Storage and Sequestration by Habitat 2021 report, and other relevant databases.
- Prior to engagement and dissemination, exploring with intended audiences how to make outputs and events relevant, interesting, useful and in an appropriate format. This includes consideration of what partners want stakeholders to do with the outputs, data or knowledge, what behaviour change programme partners would like to see as a result of their work and the overall goal of increasing support for NbS approaches and contributing to net zero.
- Ensure adequate time is given to dissemination and engagement to allow for ongoing conversations with stakeholders, for relationships to be built and to explore how sharing knowledge can lead to change. Adequate time and consideration should also be given to the legacy of the programme and how it may be taken forwards through continuing work of the partner and partnership project organisations.

Next steps

Nature Returns Programme

Key priorities for the next year of the Nature Returns programme, as identified by programme partners in the workshops and programme documents are:

- *Habitat creation and conservation*: Additional habitat creation, aiming to expand conservation efforts and biodiversity restoration.
- *Replicability and practical application*: Continuing to develop practical applications that could assist individuals involved in agri-environment work. Providing actionable insights and enabling stakeholders to understand potential outcomes of specific practices such as woodland management.
- *Practical implementation of blended funding*: Further exploration and understanding of how blended funding mechanisms can be practically implemented.
- *Collaboration with partnership project organisations and Defra*: Continuing to work closely with partnership projects to develop a collaborative approach to green finance at a landscape scale, ensuring that learning is shared with Defra.
- *Showcasing programme methodologies and outcomes*: Promoting and communicating programme approaches and early outcomes to internal and external stakeholders to increase transparency, knowledge and enhance engagement.
- *Effective communication strategies*: Developing effective communication strategies for conveying complex scientific findings to external audiences.
- *Balancing budgetary needs and evaluation*: Balancing the priorities and needs of the programme team with the constraints of the treasury's expectations, particularly regarding budget limitations. Maintaining communication and keeping stakeholders updated on evaluation progress are crucial aspects of this process.
- *Legacy creation and future schemes*: Embedding findings and effective working methods into participating organisations to establish a lasting legacy of the programme. Reach out to devolved administrations to share insights and experiences and inform the design of future schemes.

Evaluation of the Nature Returns Programme

The findings from this evaluation period will be used to inform the design of the next evaluation phase for the programme extension.

The priorities for next phase are to:

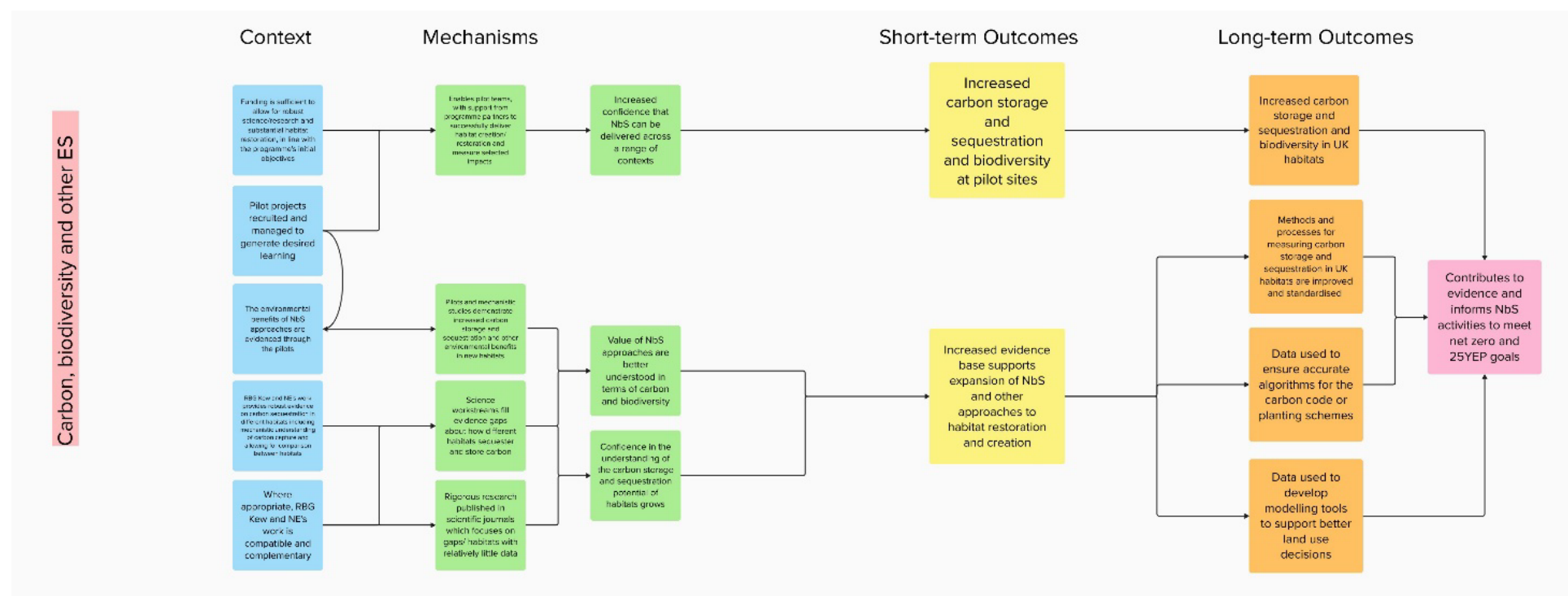
- Build on learning of what approaches have worked, what challenges were faced and whether the programme objectives have been met. What has been the benefit of the programme, what is the likely impact and how can this be communicated?
- Explore how data, outputs and learning generated by the programme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

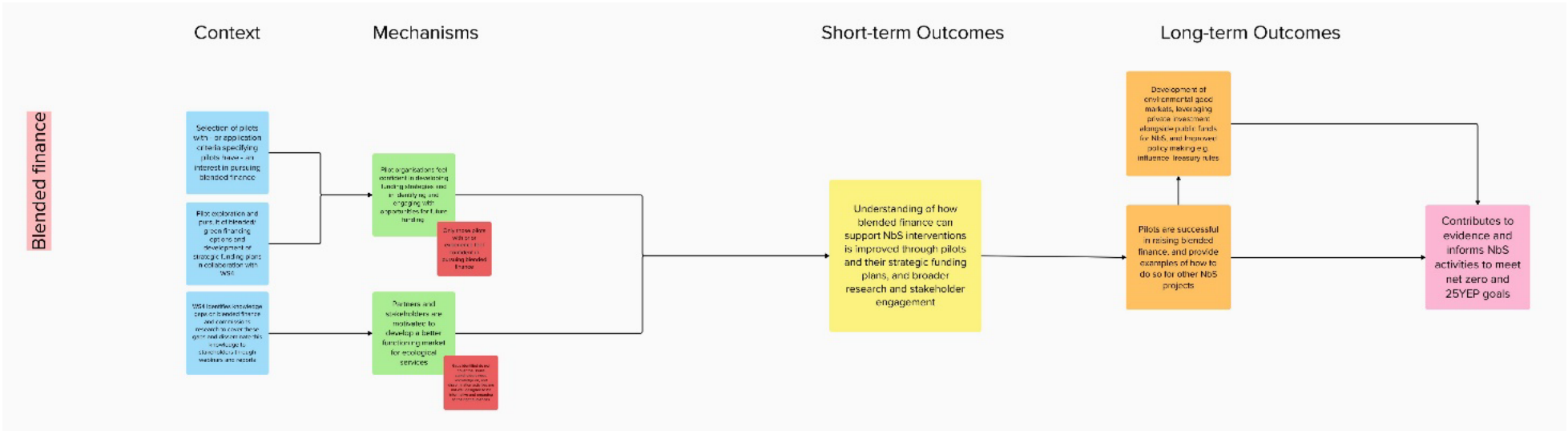
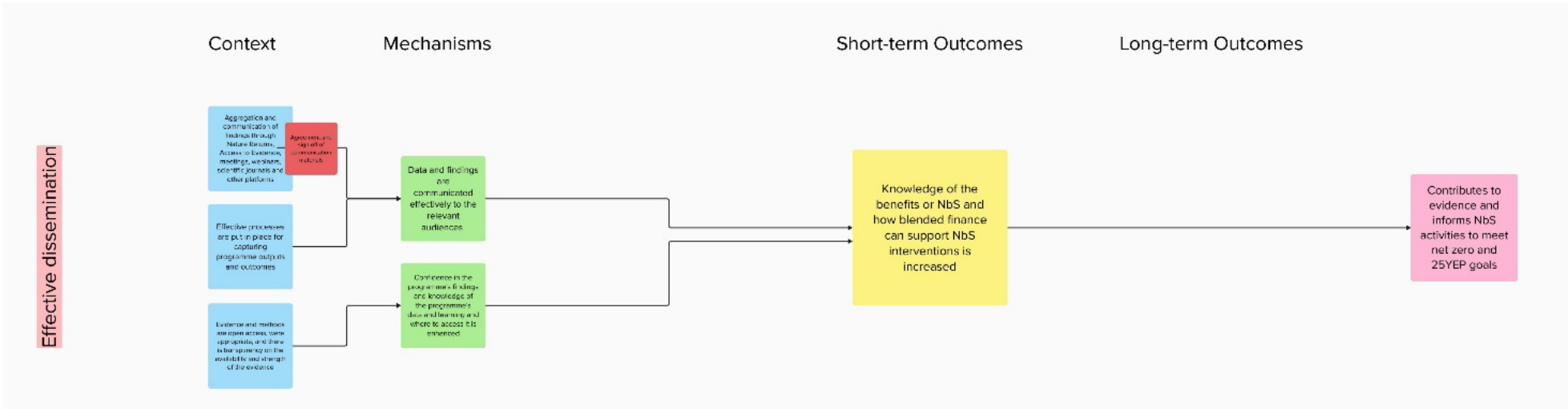
- Continue exploration of how different organisations work collectively and where this can bring benefits, particularly as working relationships and programme objectives change over the next phase.
- Begin development of a value-for-money evaluation (cost-benefit analysis and cost effectiveness analysis).
- Explore how to analyse the economic impact of the programme, building on calculations from the business case. What is the additional value of knowing the carbon capture potential of habitats?
- Understand how mapping tools have been designed and used, and what is their relevance to the partnership projects.

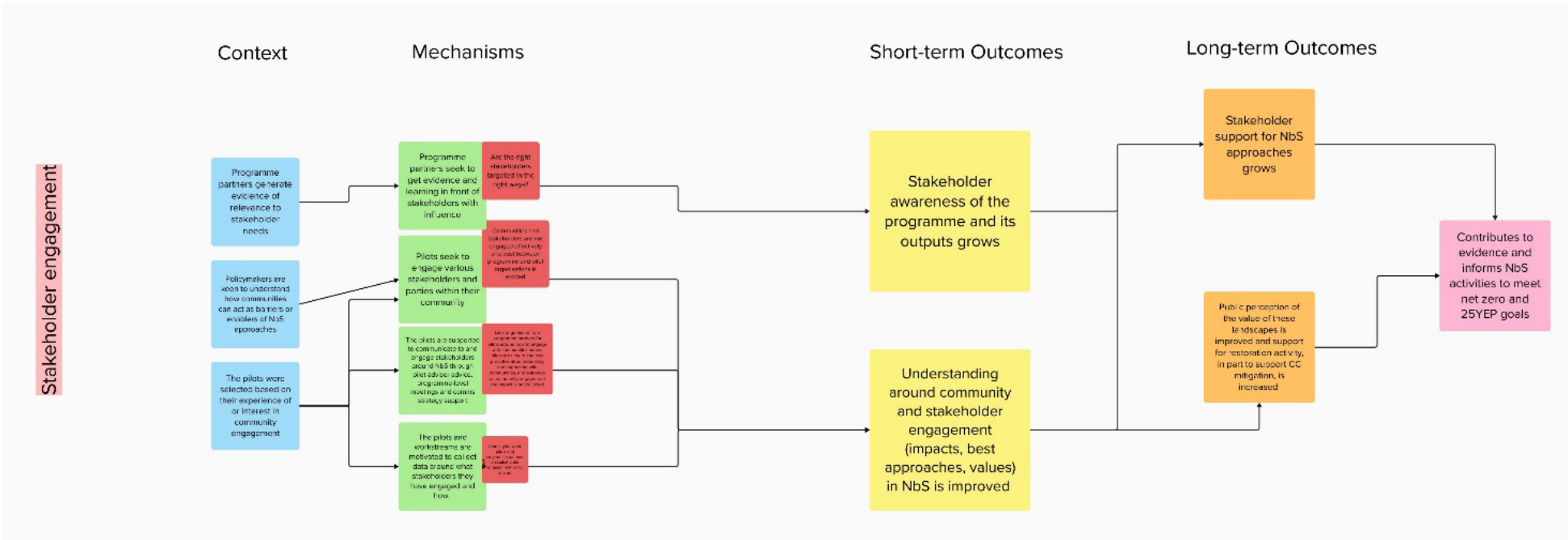
The next phase of the evaluation will seek to collect evidence through programme partner interviews and workshops, partnership project lead interviews and workshops to build case studies of the partnership projects, stakeholder mapping and engagement either directly through interviews or indirectly through programme events, initial development of a value-for-money framework and exploration of the potential economic impact of the programme.

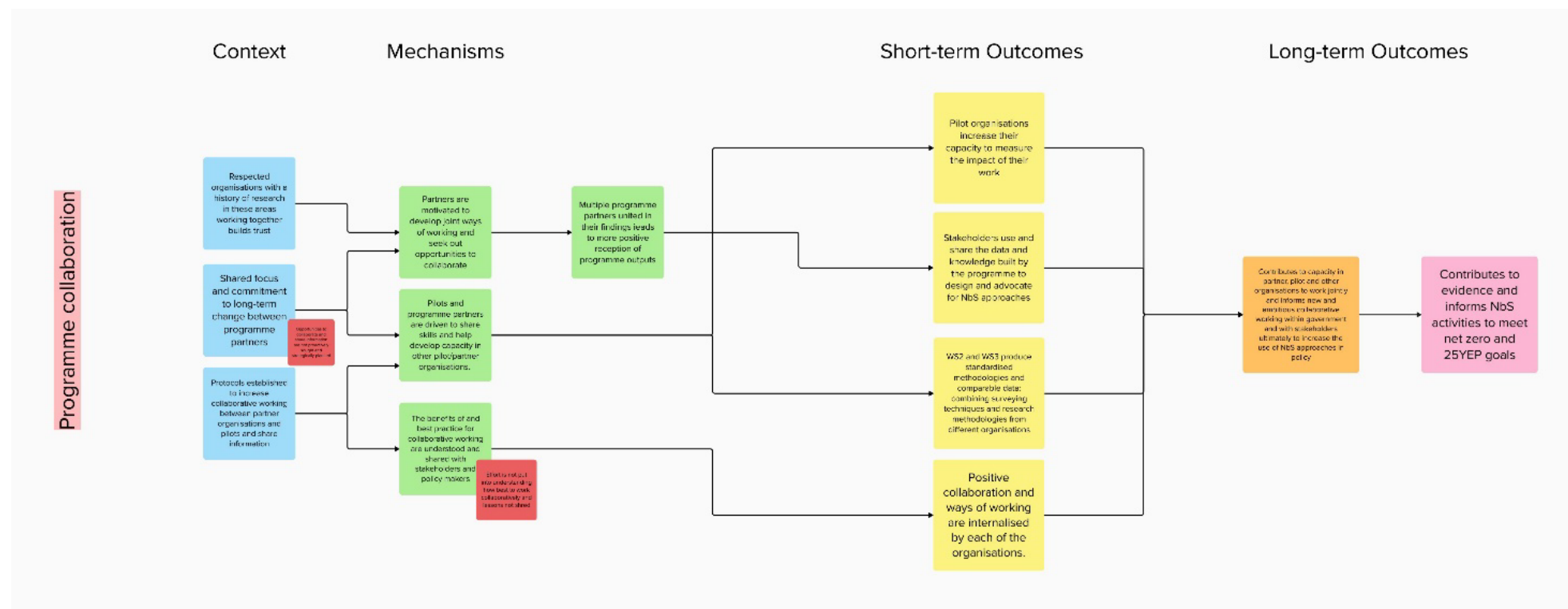
A1. Nature Returns Evaluation Framework

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









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

<p><i>Carbon, biodiversity and other ecosystem services</i></p>	<p>To what extent, why and how have the activities in WS2 and 3 led to data collection on carbon storage and sequestration? Did their activities go to plan? Was data collection possible along the desired timeline? Did the resolution and methods of the sampling meet the goals of the research?</p>	<p>What short-term impacts has the carbon science from WS2 and 3 had? Who has benefitted from this?</p>	<p>What are the expected carbon storage and sequestration, biodiversity and other environmental outcomes of the pilots and programme in different locations and habitats?</p> <p>a) What actions in what contexts have been most effective in terms of delivering environmental benefits and why?</p> <p>b) How do environmental outcomes of the pilots vary across locations and habitats? What actions in what contexts have been most effective in terms of outcomes and why? What learning has been gained, by whom and how?</p> <p>c) To what extent and how has the programme been successful in increasing the quality and/or quantity of natural capital assets within each pilot area?</p> <p>d) To what extent and how have the scientific objectives of the pilots and programme been achieved? To what extent and in what ways are each of the scientific methods and protocols of the programme likely to be scalable and applicable to different contexts?</p>
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<p><i>Carbon, biodiversity and other ecosystem services</i></p>	<p>To what extent, how and what circumstances have pilots achieved the proposed habitat changes? What approaches are being used to measure changes? (carbon, biodiversity, ecosystem services)</p>	<p>What short-term impacts have resulted from the habitat creation and restoration created by the pilot projects? Who has benefitted from this?</p>	<p>What are the expected carbon storage and sequestration, biodiversity and other environmental outcomes of the pilots and programme in different locations and habitats?</p> <p>a) What actions in what contexts have been most effective in terms of delivering environmental benefits and why?</p> <p>b) How do environmental outcomes of the pilots vary across locations and habitats? What actions in what contexts have been most effective in terms of outcomes and why? What learning has been gained, by whom and how?</p> <p>c) To what extent and how has the programme been successful in increasing the quality and/or quantity of natural capital assets within each pilot area?</p> <p>d) To what extent and how have the scientific objectives of the pilots and programme been achieved? To what extent and in what ways are each of the scientific methods and protocols of the programme likely to be scalable and applicable to different contexts?</p>
<p><i>Effective dissemination</i></p>	<p>To what extent has learning from the programme and pilots been effectively disseminated? What approaches worked, for whom and why? Who has benefitted from this communication?</p>	<p>To what extent has the learning shared by the programme been utilised by different audiences?</p>	<p>To what extent, how and for whom has the learning and knowledge shared led to an increase in NbS approaches?</p> <p>a) To what extent and how has the evidence generated by the programme led to an increase in support for NbS approaches in policy and practice?</p>

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

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

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

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

A2. UK CEH monitoring analysis report

Please see separate PDF document for this report.

A3. Strength of evidence assessment

Table A3.1: Strength of evidence assessment criteria

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

A4. Research methods

This section details the research methods used to gather data to answer the evaluation questions.

Research approach

A realist approach was chosen for this evaluation as it enabled exploration of the different experiences of the programme for different individuals in their unique contexts (the programme itself bringing together partners from different organisations with varied viewpoints). When designing research tools such as interview guides and surveys (detailed below) the evaluation team considered the key realist question of '*what works for whom, to what extent and in which circumstances*'. However, as the main outcomes for the Nature Returns programme are not yet evident, namely the carbon and ecosystem service benefits of habitat change and restoration, the overall approach was pragmatic, combining more traditional approaches to process evaluation.

At this stage of the programme the evaluation was able to explore some aspects of the realist Context, Mechanism and Outcomes structures (CMOs) within the theory of change (see Annex 1). CMOs relating to the carbon science data collection and impacts from partnership project habitat creation and restoration, have only been partially explored as the true relationships between the contexts, mechanisms and outcomes will only be known once the outcomes are evident. As a result, questions within interviews and surveys have been more process evaluation focussed, looking at challenges of delivery and effective ways of working but with a significant focus on context. Further evaluation, as the programme progresses and outcomes materialise, will further explore how these contexts have triggered mechanisms in different circumstances in turn leading to a variety of intended and unintended consequences.

Research tools

Programme monitoring data analysis

Documents relating to the programme's development, implementation and management have been shared by programme partners. These include the successful and unsuccessful partnership project applications, partnership project progress reports, meeting minutes between programme partners both individually and at steering group meetings, progress reports for each workstream and the communications campaign, Treasury reporting and audit report, commissioned research and attendance data for webinars, and scientific data being collected by WS2 and 3. The documents available to the evaluation largely contain information on the objectives and plans of the individual workstreams and partnership projects and relate to the functioning of the programme as whole. The documentation is mainly process-related and qualitative, with less of the content focused on outcomes, impact, learning and community engagement.

Document analysis occurred in two stages. Stage one was during the evaluation scoping phase. Given the wealth of data shared at this stage it was necessary to prioritise documents for analysis. Following a rapid review of all the documents (presented in the scoping report), a prioritisation exercise was carried out. The aims of the evidence collection period were listed (based on the evaluation plan developed in the scoping phase) (Table A4.1). Each document was scored as 1, 2 or 3 based on a subjective assessment of whether the document could add to evidence on each aim. This scoring was conducted independently by two researchers.

The number of documents was then further reduced by selecting a sample of minutes and progress reports (from the steering group, programme board and from each workstream/partner). One from the earliest date and the most recent date (as of June 2023) were selected to explore how progress and outcomes are being captured and any changes in approach, methods or objectives. As such the totality of meeting minutes and progress reports are not included in this

analysis but rather a snapshot. At this stage, only the partnership project's application submission outlining their vision, implementation and monitoring plans, management and funding, and the latest monthly, quarterly and end of year reports were analysed. A total of 83 documents were selected for analysis.

The second stage of document analysis occurred in February 2024 and analysed workstream progress reports (monthly and highlight reports), the Nature Returns interim report plan, programme board updates and the plans for the next stage of the programme. Updates and monthly reports analysed were from December 2023 and January 2024. At this time progress updates and quarterly reports from May 2023 to January 2024 from each of the partnership projects were reviewed.

Table A4.1 – Overview of programme monitoring documents (inclusive of first and second stage of document review)

Aims	Types of documents	No. of documents
Partnership project selection criteria and scoring	Application guidance, grants process and scoring evaluation	5
Objectives (partnership projects)	Partnership project application documents	24
Objectives (workstreams)	Progress reports	27
Methods and data collection plans	Progress reports, partnership project application documents and minutes	77 (the majority of the documents)
Communication plans	Comms updates	6
Working relationships	Meeting minutes between partners, ways of working document	16
Measuring/capturing outcomes (partnership projects)	Progress reports (partnership projects)	71
Measuring/capturing outcomes (workstreams)	Progress reports (workstreams)	38
Planning for the next year of the programme	Programme roadmap	3

Documents were analysed in excel. A coding framework was developed by the project team to explore the outcomes emerging from the programme, how they are captured, what is driving these outcomes and what affects them. In realist evaluation terms we explore the context and mechanisms leading to each outcome or the what the outcome was, who it benefitted, how it was occurring and why. Analysis also allowed themes to be generated from the documents using an inductive approach allowing for outcomes not previously considered to be captured.

Survey

An online survey was shared with programme partner/workstream and partnership project delivery teams in August 2023 to complete collaboratively within each organisation. The survey explored the types of data being collected, including metrics and methods of collection, the channels for sharing information and its relevance to other workstreams, as well as ongoing and planned stakeholder and community engagement, and relationships between partnership projects and stakeholders. The survey was completed by eight workstreams and partnership projects. The survey and the responses were administered and collected in Qualtrics. The survey results were

analysed and triangulated against the evaluation questions. The results of the survey contributed to:

- An overall picture of data being collected, and how this relates to the evaluation framework
- An understanding of what methods and protocols are being used and how aligned they are between workstreams and partnership projects

Interviews with workstream teams and programme partners

We interviewed two to four workstream team members from each of Natural England, the Environment Agency and RBG Kew, as well as the Forestry Commission and the programme sponsors, Defra and DESNZ (19 individuals in total) to get a better understanding of working relationships, the partnership project selection process, interaction with partnership projects, expected outcomes, plans for outreach and engagement and the future or legacy of the programme. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted online. Transcripts were analysed for commonalities and differences, as well as by the coding framework developed in the programme document analysis. Along with their use in informing early findings of successes and areas of improvement, the findings from interviews shaped the programme partner workshop in February 2024.

The interview guide below was developed, and questions were adapted to each interviewee based on their role and whether they had previously been interviewed.

Webinar feedback questionnaire

The Environment Agency hosted two webinars in February and April 2023 relating to blended finance and the aggregation of ecosystem service suppliers. Attendees to the webinar were sent a feedback form via an email from the Environment Agency. Questions explored what attendees had learnt from the events, what information they will use or have used in their work, how outreach activities could be improved, and other areas or topics attendees would like to see covered in the future. This helped build understanding on how the programme is impacting key stakeholders and how it could improve its outreach activities in the future. Eight participants completed the feedback form and results were analysed in excel and triangulated against the evaluation questions.

Workshop with key stakeholders

A workshop was held with the main stakeholders for this programme, including workstream leads, funders, and members of the Natural England programme management team. The workshop involved a set of reflective activities for the following questions:

- To what extent and how has the programme achieved what it set out to achieve?
- What has worked well and less well about the programme as a whole?
- What challenges has the programme faced and how have they been overcome?
- What lessons have been learnt, by whom and how, regarding programme management and delivery of NbS, blended finance and carbon storage and sequestration methods?
- How well, and in what circumstances, have programme partners worked together?
- What are the main overarching lessons from the programme at this stage?
- What are the objectives for the programme for the next phase?

The questions for discussion were developed from the evaluation framework and evaluation questions. A workshop guide was developed to assist the evaluation team in facilitating the workshop:

The workshop lasted for three hours and was held on Microsoft Teams. An agenda was shared with participants prior to the workshop which included the questions to be discussed. The workshop was facilitated by the evaluation team and the experienced realist researcher with a Mural board being used to capture individual views and key points for discussion. There were four whole group activities and two activities where breakout rooms were utilised to focus discussions on particular workstreams or topic areas. Detailed notes were taken of the discussions from both breakout groups and whole group discussions.

The data collected during the workshop contributed to understanding around workstream progress, challenges faced and overcome, ways of working and collaborative working, programme and workstream learning and the focus for the next stage of the programme. Data was analysed using the previously coding framework.

Partnership project case studies

Case studies started to be developed for each of the six partnership projects. The case studies aimed to look holistically at partnership project aims and objectives, processes and challenges, outputs and impacts, from the perspective of those involved in delivery and those engaged and impacted. They covered topics such as habitat creation and restoration, blended finance, dissemination of learning, engagement with land managers and the local community, and lessons learnt. The steps for developing the case studies included:

An in-person day at each of the partnership project sites:

An in-person day with each project team was felt to be the best way to quickly and efficiently gather interview data from the project team, involved land managers and the local community whilst gaining an understanding of the geography and wider contexts within which each partnership project is taking place. These visits took place in December 2023 and January 2024. Visits were coordinated with the project team leads to ensure a suitable time which did not disrupt habitat works. Prior to each visit a partnership project profile was created which detailed information already known about the partnership project from our scoping interviews, document review and any other contact. Consent was sought from all participants in interviews and workshops via paper consent forms. Each partnership project was visited by two members of the evaluation team. The activities undertaken consisted of:

Interviews with partnership project leads and delivery teams

In-person interviews with the partnership project leads and delivery teams were conducted on the visit days for five out of six partnership projects. Due to preferences and constraints around travel time the partnership project leads and delivery team interviews for the FWHT's Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire Freshwater Network partnership project took place via Microsoft Teams. The interviews were often one and a half to two hours long and were recorded via Dictaphones and note taking. The interviews were semi-structured and followed a guide (see below). The project team were often interviewed in pairs or as a larger group (no more than four participants in one interview) which allowed interviewees to reflect on each other's experiences.

Interviews with involved land managers

Interviews with a sample of involved land managers also took place on the in-person visit days. These interviews were only relevant for:

- Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change (Groundwork)
- Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire Freshwater Network (Freshwater Habitats Trust)
- Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery (Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust)

As these partnership projects involved direct engagement and partnership with local farming landowners and tenant farmers (collectively referred to as land managers). It was important for the evaluation that the motivations for participating experiences of participation, perceived impacts and lessons learnt by farming land managers were understood. The importance of capturing this knowledge and learning was emphasised by partnership project leads who often find it challenging to engage with the farming community around nature projects.

Interviews were semi-structured and 30 minutes in length. Some interviews took place in interviewees homes, at agreed locations or on the partnership project sites themselves. Interviews were recorded via Dictaphones and note taking. The interviews followed the following topic guide:

Workshops with the local community

These workshops aimed to gather local community members and/or volunteers to discuss engagement activities, the impact of engagement and perceived impacts of the partnership project work. Understanding the perceptions of local communities and how best organisations can engage with them was identified by DESNZ as a key aspect of interest. Five out of six community workshops took place in-person during the visit days. The workshop with volunteers from FWHT's Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire Freshwater Network partnership project took place via Microsoft Teams. The workshops were one and a half to two hours long and were recorded via Dictaphones and note taking. The workshops followed the interview guide included in the annex.

Where time and weather permitted land walks were done at partnership project sites to see some of the habitat works being undertaken. This helped to the evaluation team to understand the geographical context in which the partnership project was taking place and see some of the wider work being undertaken by project teams. They also allow for a deeper understanding of progress and outcomes by the evaluation team through visual observations.

Review of documentation

Partnership project reports and updates (end of year reports, quarterly reports and monthly reports) sent to NE were reviewed for additional information and quantitative data relating to partnership project activity. Relevant information was compared with interview data and synthesised into for the case studies.

Analysis and write up

Interview and workshop transcripts were generated through Trint (a transcript software subscription) and analysed using an inductive coding framework based on the evaluation questions. All data sources were triangulated to develop the case studies and build a picture of partnership project progress and experience. Where additional detail or confirmation was needed answers were sought via email with the partnership project leads. Final case studies will be presented in reporting at the end of the project in March 2025.

Interviews with key policy stakeholders

It is important that the Nature Returns programme engage with policy teams who are expected to use the evidence being generated by the Nature Returns programme, e.g. Defra's Landscape Recovery and Defra's Green Finance Teams, ALBs and other internal and external stakeholders. As a result, the evaluation team aimed to set up interviews with key policy teams across Defra and DESNZ to understand their current understanding around blended finance and NbS, how they

access and use evidence on these concepts and how they think the programme learning and outputs could be of benefit to their team. The interviews aimed to help the Nature Returns programme to maximise its engagement across government and provide opportunities for peer-to-peer learning around NbS and blended finance.

Six individuals from Defra, FC and DESNZ were invited to interview in February 2024. There was a very low number of responses. One of these interviews was completed. The interview followed a semi-structured guide (see below). It took 30 minutes and was on Microsoft Teams.

The evaluation team aim to re-launch this exercise in the next stage of evaluation with a wider group of policy stakeholders as it was felt that those selected in this phase were already well associated with the Nature Returns programme. Greater consideration will be given to stakeholders who may not have been considered by the programme team and to alternative pathways to disseminating programme learning.

A5. Webinar Feedback Questionnaire Results

Feedback on the WS4 webinars: Governance of blended funding approaches and The Aggregation of Ecosystem Service Suppliers. Feedback given via a survey sent to all survey respondents (8 responses received)

Feedback on the WS4 webinars: Governance of blended funding approaches and The Aggregation of Ecosystem Service Suppliers. Feedback given via a survey sent to all survey respondents (8 responses received)

Respondent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Organisation	Government/ arm's-length body (ALB)	Government/ arm's-length body (ALB)	Consultancy	Government/ arm's-length body (ALB)	Government/ arm's-length body (ALB)	Nature recovery project	Government/ arm's-length body (ALB)	Government/ arm's-length body (ALB)
Webinar attended	Both	Governance of blended funding approaches (14th Feb 2023)	Governance of blended funding approaches (14th Feb 2023)	The Aggregation of Ecosystem Service Suppliers (26th April 2023)	The Aggregation of Ecosystem Service Suppliers (26th April 2023)	Both	Governance of blended funding approaches (14th Feb 2023)	Both
What were your motivations for attending?	Relevance to your own work	Relevance to your own work	Involved in the research	Relevance to your own work	Relevance to your own work	Relevance to your own work	Relevance to your own work	Relevance to your own work
Was the webinar useful?	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Please specify how	Useful subject matter - current and relevant to my work	All strategic and theory based. Was hoping for more operational delivery advice and guidance.	It helped me make contacts with people with shared perspectives.	Learning about external funding	Somewhat, it was a lot of information to take in and quite technical	Driving mainstreaming ESS markets.	It's an evolving field, interesting to hear about some of the approaches to date / potential pipeline	The webinar really built my understanding in this area, which had previously been limited.
Do you intend to use, or have you already used the information you	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

Respondent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
learned/ resources you received in the webinar?								
If yes, how have you shared it?	Shared this information further	As and when needed for reference and start points to go looking for more information.	N/A	To develop a funding profile for Newcastle City Centre Flood Alleviation Scheme	N/A	Building knowledge around nature markets and emerging policy	N/A	I've been able to share this information internally within the ALB and also with external partners interested in this area.
If no, why not?	N/A	N/A	I was already aware of the research which I thought failed to really address the challenge of blended finance governance.	N/A	The information was very technical and presented in a dull way kept losing interest	N/A	Doesn't quite align with core work at present	N/A
What can the Environment Agency (EA) do to improve the way they share their research with the public? How would you like the EA to share information/res	Recorded webinars	Improved comms and reach.	Unfortunately, the research was mis-conceived so improvements in communication would not have helped. Earlier engagement in defining research	Don't know	Webinars are good need more diagrams than lots of text to keep people's interest	Webinars, online workshops etc. What is missing a central information library for all info related to NbS and Natural Capital. A single public library /	Targeted webinars are good, especially with case studies and external parties presenting	A central community of practice 'space' where all the relevant reports, projects and research across the government bodies can be

Respondent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
earch in the future?			questions would have been helpful.			database would be really useful.		easily accessible.
Are there any topics related to blended or green finance that you would like future webinars to focus on?	No response	Practical implementation and case studies	I think they need to revisit the question of blended finance governance looking beyond organisational choice to governance of the blended finance itself. At the moment the assumption is that should be through contracts, but they are clearly not fit for purpose. this issue should be explored.	Legislation involved in green finance	How to use the tools	Legal / contracts corporate structures for projects private finance beyond BNG and NN (BNG will have limited capacity to drive landscape-scale change).	How they are compatible with existing / emerging / developing government schemes	Future needs of buyers of ecosystem service markets
Do you have any other comments/feed back on your webinar experience?	No response	Webinar itself was well delivered and informative	No	It was interesting	It was a bit dull and hard to engage with the information	We still need more certainty and clarity on policy. Still too many questions and not enough answers.	No	Really great webinar, interesting topic, well presented

A6. Programme Monitoring Survey Data

Workstream 1	Metric	Method	Who	Data stored	How often	Unit of measurement	Planned, ongoing or completed
Community engagement	Engagement	data collection post event (central comms)	Programme management team (NE)	SharePoint	per event	count per attendee/social media like/ etc	Ongoing
Programme progress	Workstream/partnership project deliverables	monthly reporting	Programme management team (NE)	SharePoint site	monthly	narrative	Ongoing
Workstream 1	Metric	Method	Who	Data stored	How often	Unit of measurement	Planned, ongoing or completed

Workstream 2	Metric	Method	Who	Data stored	How often	Unit of measurement	Planned, ongoing or completed
Biodiversity	Plant community composition	quadrat based field recording	NE staff	NE SharePoint site	Initial survey. Future TBC	species list with cover estimate	Ongoing
Biodiversity	Vegetation structure (surrogate for habitat quality)	quadrate based field recording	NE staff	NE SharePoint site	Initial survey. Future TBC	sward height estimate	Ongoing
Carbon	soil carbon	coring and lab analysis	NE staff in field. Lab work contracted to specialist contractor (NRM)	NE SharePoint site	Initial survey. Future TBC	carbon per unit volume and converted to stock per hectare	Ongoing

Workstream 2	Metric	Method	Who	Data stored	How often	Unit of measurement	Planned, ongoing or completed
	carbon dioxide and methane flux	in situ measurement with gas analysers	NE staff	NE SharePoint site	3-4 times per year	quantity of CO2/ methane per unit surface area	Ongoing
Carbon	tree carbon	field measurements of tree height and diameter	NE staff	NE SharePoint site	initial survey future repeats TBC	tonnes of carbon per hectare	Ongoing
Carbon	scrub and hedge carbon	ground based LIDAR	NE staff	NE SharePoint site for processed data (raw data TBC)	initial survey, future TBC	tonnes of carbon per hectare	Planned
Programme progress	progress towards workstream objectives	monthly review	NE staff	NE SharePoint site	monthly	RAG status derived from number of sites/ samples	Ongoing

Workstream 4	Metric	Method	Who	Data stored	How often	Unit of measurement	Planned, ongoing or completed
Blended/green finance	Engagement w/ sprints on blended funding	not sure yet - probably surveys and # attendees	EA	Shared drive	Event oriented	survey feedback (before, after)	Planned
Blended/green finance	Funding stream identification	qualitative - discussions	EA	Shared drive	Event oriented	Qualitative data	Planned
Blended/green finance	Non-grant finance (capital or revenue)	Interviews	EA	Shared drive	2x per year (autumn and spring) (really)	£	Planned

Workstream 4	Metric	Method	Who	Data stored	How often	Unit of measurement	Planned, ongoing or completed
	brought in to support landscape scale NbS				pre-sprint and post-sprint)		
Blended/green finance	Creation / use of strategic funding plan	Interviews	EA	Shared drive	2x per year (autumn and spring) (really pre-sprint and post-sprint)	presence / development of model	Planned
Community engagement	Partnership engagement at landscape scale	not sure how to answer this?	EA	Shared drive	Event oriented	Qualitative data	Planned
	Willingness to formalise partnership (using legal structure) if needed	not sure how to answer this?	EA	Shared drive	Event oriented	Qualitative data	Planned

Plymouth City Council	Metric	Method	Who	Data stored	How often	Unit of measurement	Planned, ongoing or completed
Biodiversity	Biodiversity improvements via habitat interventions and improvements	Recording of works carried out in compartments as informed by DEFRA Metric 3.1	PCC	Shared drive	Monthly collation with collection at the completion of every site-based task.	Quantitative data, i.e., numbers of different demographics participating in activities, plus qualitative via interviews /	Ongoing

Plymouth City Council	Metric	Method	Who	Data stored	How often	Unit of measurement	Planned, ongoing or completed
						questionnaires following activities.	
Carbon	Storage and sequestration (tonnes) by habitat type	Gas flux and soil carbon, plus vegetation	Natural England	Natural England database	Quarterly	Metric tonnes	Ongoing
Community engagement	Number of hours of community engagement	Via observation, interview and recording at events	Engagement and Campaigns Officer (PCC)	Shared drive (accessible to PCC and NT), and also shared via monthly / quarterly reports to Natural England	After every activity, then collated monthly	Quantitative data, i.e., numbers of different demographics participating in activities, plus qualitative via interviews / questionnaires following activities.	Ongoing
Programme progress	Progress against milestones agreed with funders as part of initial bid	Community engagement data is collected by the Engagement and Campaigns Officer at events, recorded on a spreadsheet on a shared drive then collated by the Project Manager for monthly and	Project delivery team (NT), Project Officer (PCC), project manager (PCC)	Shared drive (accessed by NT and PCC) and shared with Natural England via monthly and quarterly reports.	Monthly collation with collection at the completion of every site-based task.	Quantitative data via compartment maps informed by UKHAB Metric 3.1, qualitative via accompanying photographs.	Ongoing

Plymouth City Council	Metric	Method	Who	Data stored	How often	Unit of measurement	Planned, ongoing or completed
		quarterly reporting. Habitat interventions and nature-based solutions works are recorded by the NbS Project Officer (PCC), recorded on a Gantt chart with accompanying maps and photographs, then collated by the Project Manager for monthly and quarterly reporting to Natural England					

Derbyshire Wildlife Trust	Metric	Method	Who	Data stored	How often	Unit of measurement	Planned, ongoing or completed
Biodiversity	Habitat diversity	Drone & Fixed-point photography	Contractor & Living Landscape Officers	SharePoint	As & when	Photographs	Ongoing

Derbyshire Wildlife Trust	Metric	Method	Who	Data stored	How often	Unit of measurement	Planned, ongoing or completed
	Habitat diversity	Habitat surveys	Nature Recovery Adviser	SharePoint	Annually - dependent on funding	UKHab data - data classification and BNG condition score	Ongoing
Biodiversity	Habitat diversity	Vegetation survey	Natural England	N/K	Annually TBC	% cover (species, bare ground, other)	Ongoing
Blended/green finance	Testing blended/green finance models	Creating financial projections	Consultant/DWT	SharePoint	As & when	Qualitative/market research and landowner engagements	Ongoing
Blended/green finance	Reporting on blended/green finance models	Tracking different projections for financial outcomes	Consultant/DWT	SharePoint	As & when	Qualitative/market research and landowner engagements	Ongoing
Carbon	Carbon/soil quality	Gas flux assessment	Natural England	N/K	Annually TBC	CO2, Methane	Ongoing
	Carbon/soil quality	Soil cores	Natural England	N/K	Annually TBC	Total carbon, organic carbon, nitrogen density	Ongoing
Community engagement	Volunteer engagement	Recording sign ups	Wilder Communities Officer	Progress tracker on SharePoint	As & when	Number of individuals	Ongoing
	Community Group engagement	Recording engagements	Wilder Communities Officer	Progress tracker on SharePoint	As & when	Number of groups	Ongoing
	Community feedback	Surveys, emails	Wilder Communities Officer &	Progress tracker on SharePoint	As & when	Quotative/qualitative data	Planned

Derbyshire Wildlife Trust	Metric	Method	Who	Data stored	How often	Unit of measurement	Planned, ongoing or completed
			Comms department				
Community engagement	Schools engaged	Recording school interactions	Wilder Communities Officer	Progress tracker on SharePoint	As & when	Number of schools	Ongoing
Community engagement	No. of school pupils engaged	Recording pupil engagement	Wilder Communities Officer	Progress tracker on SharePoint	As & when	Number of pupils taking part	Ongoing

Freshwater Habitats Trust	Metric	Method	Who	Data stored	How often	Unit of measurement	Planned, ongoing or completed
Biodiversity	Species (Plants)	Survey work	FHT	shared drive	annually	species count	Ongoing
Community engagement	Well-being	participant diaries	FHT	shared drive	monthly		Ongoing
Community engagement	Volunteer engagement	Number of volunteers attending events and volunteer work parties	FHT				Ongoing

Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust	Metric	Method	Who	Data stored	How often	Unit of measurement	Planned, ongoing or completed
Biodiversity	Plant diversity	Nature reserve condition monitoring	GWT	GWT Server	annually	percentage cover, negative and positive indicators,	Ongoing

Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust	Metric	Method	Who	Data stored	How often	Unit of measurement	Planned, ongoing or completed
						species presence	
Biodiversity	Soil eDNA	eDNA samples and analysis	GWT/Naturemetrics	GWT server	year 1,5 and 10	Species DNA coding	Planned
	Grassland Fungi diversity	'W' survey method	GWT	GWT Server	2 x year annually	Species presence	Planned
	Butterfly diversity	UK BMS transect	GWT	GWT Server	1 x month through Apr - Sep (annually)	Species presence	Planned
	Dormouse presence	PTES survey methodology	GWT	GWT Server	2 x per year (annually)	Species presence or absence	Planned
	Pollinators survey	TBC	GWT	GWT Server	TBC	Species counts	Planned
	Moth traps	GWT	GWT Server	TBC	Species, counts diversity		Planned
	Small mammals	Longworth trap	GWT	GWT Server	TBC	Species diversity	Planned
Blended/green finance	Engagement with businesses	Client Management system	GWT	GWT	monthly	contacts and record of leads.	Planned
Carbon	Carbon lock up in trees	LIDAR	GWT	GWT Server	annually	Growth rate	Planned
Community engagement	Volunteer hours	Timesheet	GWT	GWT server	weekly	hours	Ongoing
	Engagement events	number of events/attendees	GWT	GWT Server	annually	qualitative feedback	Ongoing
Other ecosystem services	Spatial mapping of priority habitats	Remote sensing	GWT	GWT Server	annually	habitat connectivity	Planned

Groundwork	Metric	Method	Who	Data stored	How often	Unit of measurement	Planned, ongoing or completed
Biodiversity	Biodiversity	vegetation sampling	NE and GNEC	Shared drive and paper	annually	species count and sward height	Ongoing
	Biodiversity	bird survey	consultant	shared drive	annually	numbers of species and individuals	
Blended/green finance	Blended/green finance	meeting notes	GNEC	shared drive	monthly	data from interviews	Planned
Carbon	Soil organic carbon	Soil cores	NE and GNEC	shared drive	annually	analytic data	Ongoing
	Carbon / soil quality	Gas flux	NE and GNEC	shared drive and paper	annually	analytic data	
Community engagement	Community engagement	recording numbers	GNEC	shared drive	monthly	numbers of participants	Ongoing
Programme progress	Programme progress	tracking partnership project activities	GNEC & steering group	shared drive	monthly	comparison of progress against the programme	Ongoing

	Workstream 1	Workstream 2	Workstream 4	PCC	DWT	FHT	GWT	GW
Where do you save the data and who has access?	SharePoint site (programme with some info only accessible to Natural England).	Natural England SharePoint site (access restricted to team members).	SharePoint site (programme)	SharePoint and Google Drive (NE, PCC, NT have access)	SharePoint (only certain DWT employees have access)	SharePoint and volunteer database	GWT secure Server (access for GWT employees associated with project)	SharePoint (access for steering group members and the internal team)

	Workstream 1	Workstream 2	Workstream 4	PCC	DWT	FHT	GWT	GW
Which groups or stakeholders do you share your findings with or plan to share your findings with?	Engaging within government primarily, and through other workstreams, with more localised or specialised stakeholders and groups.	Programme partners, colleagues in Natural England, other public bodies, Defra and DESNZ, farmers and other land managers, the research community, environmental NGOs, private sector organisations with green finance interests and possibly the wider public, depending on opportunities	All stakeholders	All stakeholders	Project Board, various key stakeholders, Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts, community groups, general public Landowners	Landowners and local records centres	Landowners, land managers, community, educational institutions and private sector/businesses	All the agencies and stakeholders - National trust, Natural England, Environment Agency, Forestry Commission, Great Northumberland Forest, Woodland Trust, Middleton North Estate, Little Harle Estate and University of Northumberland
How do you share data?	Shared online space; meetings; email; informative events	Shared online space; meetings; email; informative events	Email; informative events	Shared online space; informative events; project reports and evaluation	Shared online space; meetings; email; informative events; PR's, blogs, website and social media	Shared online space; meetings; email; informative events	Meetings; email; informative events	Shared online space; meetings; email; informative events
Who do you believe should have access to	Once in a reasonable form, anyone	Anyone who is interested - it is publicly	For some info that can help with learning,	As mentioned above, it will	We feel that the data we collect should	People who are interested in habitat	Project partners and funders	Participating landowners are keen to

	Workstream 1	Workstream 2	Workstream 4	PCC	DWT	FHT	GWT	GW
the data you are collecting?	with an interest.	funded. It should however only be released when datasets are complete and have been through appropriate QA/QC.	then all should have access. Where we get into funding numbers, amount of money needed, raised, that maybe is more sensitive and is up to the partnership projects to control.	be available to all.	be open source as it will be of benefit to many stakeholders and will be for the greater good of society.	restoration and creation, local interest groups, volunteers		see results of the carbon and biodiversity data once this is available in an accessible format

A7. Research tools

Survey Questions: Programme Monitoring Survey

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey for the Nature-based Solution (NbS) for Climate Change at a Landscape Scale programme evaluation.

It is expected that this survey will take between 20-30 minutes to complete. Please be as detailed as possible in your answers as they will help us to understand the data that each partnership project and work stream is collecting, as well as possible gaps that the programme should address.

The link to this survey can be shared amongst team members so that multiple individuals can contribute to the answers. All responses will be saved to the same survey for each partnership project or workstream.

[Data protection section]

You and your partnership project/workstream

1. What is/are your role(s) within the partnership project , workstream or project (each survey participant should fill out one row below to share their respective role:

Participant	Your role(s)	Number of days that you work on the partnership project/workstream per month	Length of time that you have been working on the partnership project /workstream (please specify months or years)
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			

2. Which organisation do you work for or are you a part of? (open text)
3. Please select the name of the partnership project or workstream you are responding on behalf of from the dropdown list:

[Drop down list including]:

Derwent Forest Landscape Recovery Project

Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire Freshwater Network

Severn Solutions for Nature Recovery (SSNR)

Plymouth's Natural Grid Nature Based Solutions for Climate Change at the Landscape Scale

Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change (WRCC)

Wild Exmoor Carbon Sequestration Project

Workstream 1
Workstream 2
Workstream 3
Workstream 4

Monitoring Methods and Activities

Firstly, we'd like to understand the detailed methods that you are carrying out for monitoring outcomes. By understanding in detail what each partnership project and workstream are monitoring, we will be able to piece together the programme's monitoring activities as a whole. Please complete the following question and then fill in the grid below for all outcomes and monitoring activities that are being conducted.

4. What outcomes are being monitored? OR what are you measuring? (Please select all that apply)

[drop down list]

- Biodiversity (for example: habitat surveys, biodiversity surveys, reptile surveys, invertebrate surveys)
- Carbon (for example: soil organic carbon analysis, remote sensing)
- Other ecosystem services (for example: water infiltration, air quality, or water quality)
- Community engagement (for example: number of volunteers, number of public events, or participant feedback)
- Programme progress (for example: actions towards objectives or partnership project activities)
- Blended/green finance (for example: engagement with blended/green finance)

5. Please complete the grid to provide information on how the outcomes you have selected are being monitored. Use one row for each monitoring metric.

See annex for examples:

(Note: If you are doing multiple activities to monitor the same outcome, please complete one row for each unique metric or method that you are using and repeat the answer in column 1 to indicate that the same outcome is being measured):

1. What outcome is being measured?	What is being measured? (That is, what metric)	How is the data being collected (That is, what method?)	Who is collecting the data? (Monitoring organisation)	Where is the data being stored? (For example, saved on a shared drive, saved to a personal device, or recorded on paper)	How frequently is data being collected? (For example, monthly, quarterly, annually)	Unit of measurement? (for example, qualitative data from interviews, species count, sward height (cm))

1. What outcome is being measured?	What is being measured? (That is, what metric)	How is the data being collected (That is, what method?)	Who is collecting the data? (Monitoring organisation)	Where is the data being stored? (For example, saved on a shared drive, saved to a personal device, or recorded on paper)	How frequently is data being collected? (For example, monthly, quarterly, annually)	Unit of measurement? (for example, qualitative data from interviews, species count, sward height (cm))

Now, we'd like to understand your overall view on monitoring activities so far. Please answer the questions below by providing detailed information on your monitoring activities.

6. Please describe how effective you think monitoring activities have been so far? (Open text)
7. Have you experienced any challenges related to monitoring activities and outcomes? If so, please describe the challenges in detail. (Open text)
8. What support would enable you to complete monitoring activities more effectively? (Open text)

Working with stakeholders

In this section, we will ask about the relationships forming through the programme activities and how these collaborations are contributing to programme monitoring. Please note when we say stakeholders, we are referring to landholders, volunteers, researchers, businesses, or other involved individuals and organisations.

9. Please describe how you have worked or plan to work with stakeholders (landholders, volunteers, researchers, businesses, or other involved individuals and organisations) to deliver your partnership project or workstream outcomes? (Open text)
10. Have stakeholders contributed to monitoring activities or do you expect them to? (Yes/No)
11. Please complete the grid question below, providing information on the stakeholders you are working with on the partnership project/workstream.

Stakeholder organisation	Role in the partnership project/workstream	How are they collecting monitoring data? (E.g., conducting ecological surveys, inspections etc)	How many years have your organisations worked together?

Community Engagement

We understand partnership projects and workstreams have been involving local community members in the programme activities. Please fill out the following section to share more information about community engagement.

12. Have you involved the local community in your partnership project /workstream? (Yes/no)
13. Do you keep track of the number of people engaged from the local community (for example, tracking volunteer numbers, site visitors, citizen scientists, other)? (Yes/no)
14. How many people from the local community have been involved in the partnership project/workstream? (Open text)
15. Please list any community or external groups that have been involved or collaborated with (Open text)

Data storage and sharing

We would like to better understand how data is being stored for future use and which groups are sharing their information to wider circles. Please complete the following section on data storage and data sharing.

16. Where do you save the data that you record or collect? (Please include who has access to this data) (Open text)

17. Who do you share the data you have collected with? (Open text)

18. How do you share data?

Shared online space (such as Microsoft Teams, Google, Slack, other applications)

Meetings

Email

Informative events (such as seminars, webinars, other)

Other (please specify)

Blended Finance (routing for partnership projects and WS4)

19. Are you exploring opportunities for blended/green finance? (Yes/No)

20. How are you exploring blended finance opportunities/models? (Open text)

21. How are you reporting on any exploration of blended finance? For example, are you sharing findings through progress reports, team meetings, etc.? (Open text)

Programme management and performance (routing for WS1, WS2, WS3, WS4)

22. How are you tracking programme progress towards intended outcomes? (Open text)

23. What data would you like to have to assess the progress of the programme? (Open text)

Closing questions

24. Do you have any recommendations for how data can be standardised across partnership projects and workstreams? (Open text)

25. Do you have any further comments on monitoring as part of your partnership project or workstream? (Open text)

Survey Annex: Examples of monitoring methods

1.Outcome	Metric	Method(s)
Biodiversity	Biodiversity net gain (BNG)	BNG survey
Biodiversity	Habitat diversity	Habitat survey
Biodiversity	Plant diversity	Botanical survey
Biodiversity	Mammal diversity	Mammal survey
Biodiversity	Invertebrate diversity	Invertebrate survey
Carbon/soil quality	Ground level carbon dioxide and methane flux	Gas flux assessment using PP Systems EGM-5 Gas Analyser
Carbon/soil quality	Carbon stock	Carbon stock assessment for hedgerow and scrub using LiDAR
Carbon/soil quality	Soil compaction	Proctor Compaction Test
Ecosystem services	Filtration rates	Water infiltration test (for example: drainpipe test or spade test)
Ecosystem services	Microorganism composition	Plate count method, counting bacteria, or proxy methods (including tracking turbidity, wet or dry mass of soil)
Ecosystem services	Water quality	Water quality survey
Ecosystem services	Hydrology	Measuring the changing seasonal water levels and impact of any habitat creation
Carbon/soil quality	Carbon content	Remote sensing
Community engagement	Volunteers engaged	Tracking volunteer sign-ups, recording volunteer numbers
Community engagement	Community feedback	Social surveys, participant feedback
Blended/Green finance	Testing blended/green finance models	Creating financial projections
Blended/Green finance	Reporting on blended/green finance models	Tracking different projections for financial outcomes
Programme progress	Partnership project outcomes	Tracking partnership project activities

Interview Topic Guide: Programme Partners (workstream and Forestry Commission teams)

Purpose of this study:

ICF is evaluating the Nature-based Solutions for Climate Change at a Landscape Scale programme.

The overall aims are to:

- Provide timely learning and guidance to help the programme succeed
- Ensure that information needed to showcase the work of the programme is being collected
- Understand how all of the aspects of the NbS programme are working together
- Explore both successes and where improvements could be made

Results of the evaluation will be prepared for Spring 2024.

The purpose of this interview is to explore:

- Evidence of what works and what doesn't in terms of how the different parts of the programme work together and function
- The partnership project selection process and ongoing engagement with the partnership projects
- Evidence of how collaboration between programme partners is fostered and what impact it has on programme objectives
- Early outcomes and impacts of the programme, progress towards objectives and plans for outreach and wider engagement

The interview to take approximately 60 minutes. Questions in black will be prioritised.

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

Introduction

1. What is your role within your organisation and within the NbS programme?
2. What are you currently working on?

Outcomes and impacts

3. What do you think will be the main outcomes of the programme at its conclusion? And what impact do you think that could potentially have (the longer-term outcomes and impacts) for different stakeholders?
 - a. How do you think the findings and outcomes of the programme can contribute to evidence and inform other NbS activities to meet net zero and 25YEP goals?
4. Do you feel that the programme is on track to achieve the objectives it set out to achieve? Why/Why not? What has changed or would need to change?
5. What has surprised you about the programme and its implementation and impact?

Collaborative working

6. How well do you think programme partners are working together? Are there examples of where it has worked well and where perhaps not so well?
7. Why do you think those examples worked well or not so well?
8. Are the different workstreams integrated as expected? Do you think this could be improved? What would be the added benefits?
9. What do you do to create a good collaborative work environment within the programme and within your own team?
10. What factors do you think contribute to a positive working relationship between partners?
11. What else have you learnt about ways of working together and what opportunities do you see for future collaboration?

Partnership project selection and engagement

12. Do you think the process for recruitment and selection of partnership projects was successful, timely and efficient? Did the process work equally well for all applicants? How do you think the partnership project selection process could have been improved?
13. Do you think the partnership projects selected represent an appropriate basis for testing NbS for climate change at the landscape scale? Why/why not?
14. How would you describe your engagement with the partnership projects? Is this as expected? Why/why not? How do you plan to engage with the partnership projects in the future?

Learning and dissemination

15. What evidence and learning has the programme as a whole provided so far about the following topics:
 - a. NbS implementation
 - b. Carbon science
 - c. Governance systems
 - d. Engaging with communities
 - e. Blended finance
 - f. Other?
16. Have you been able to apply these lessons to the delivery of the programme/ your workstream? How and what impact has this had?
17. What plans and mechanisms are there in place for disseminating learning from the partnership projects and programme? Who is this likely to reach/who is the target audience?
18. Who is most likely to have an interest in the programme and its outcomes and impacts?

Wrap up

19. Is there anything else about the NbS programme, workstreams or partnership project partnership projects that you didn't get to talk about today that you think it would be useful for us to know for the evaluation?

Questions for comms teams (NE and Kew)

- What has been your involvement with the wider programme?

- Do you think engagement and collaboration could be enhanced within the programme?
- What plans are being made around disseminating the work of the programme? Who is this likely to reach/ is the target audience?
- What impact do you think these comms and dissemination activities will have and on who?

Questions for sub-contractors (e.g., Kew's academic partners)

- What are you working on?
- How does it relate to the wider NbS programme?
- What has been your involvement with the wider programme?
- Do you think engagement and collaboration could be enhanced within the programme? And why?
- What do you think the impacts of your work will be?
- How do you plan to disseminate the results of your work? Who is this likely to reach/ is the target audience?

Webinar Feedback Questionnaire

Introduction

Thank you for attending a webinar hosted by the Environment Agency. To improve webinars in the future, we greatly appreciate any feedback that you may provide in this survey. We anticipate the survey to take roughly 5 minutes.

Webinar Feedback:

1. Which webinar did you attend?
 - a. Governance of blended funding approaches (14th Feb 2023)
 - b. The Aggregation of Ecosystem Service Suppliers (26th April 2023)
 - c. Both
2. What motivated you the most to attend the webinar? (Select one)
 - a. Interesting subject matter
 - b. Relevance to your own work
 - c. Interested in work of EA
 - d. Other (specify)
3. Was the webinar useful to you? (Yes/No)
 - a. Please specify why (Open text)
4. Do you intend to use, or have you already used the information you learned/resources you received in the webinar? (Yes or No)
 - a. If yes, please specify how? (Open text)
 - b. If no, why not?
 - i. Materials not in a useful format
 - ii. Materials not interesting/useful
 - iii. Other (specify)

5. What can EA do to improve the way they share their research with the public? How would you like the EA to share information/research in the future? (Open text)
6. Are there any topics related to blended or green finance that you would like future webinars to focus on? (Open text)
7. Do you have any other comments/feedback on your webinar experience? (Open text)

Nature Returns Programme Partners workshop guide

Introductions

Brief introductions (10 mins)

Introduction from NE Evaluation Lead – purpose/progress of evaluation (5 mins)

Introduction from Realist Expert – Approach to workshop (5 mins)

Activities

Group discussion 1 (25 mins)

- Present objectives from the business case
- Range of outputs and achievements to date

Q. Has the programme achieved what it set out to achieve?

Participants to check list and add or change elements (not objectives)

Prompts: Who benefits/disbenefits from these and how?

Breakout discussions 1 (*assign participants to 3 groups*) (20 mins)

Q. What has gone well and what hasn't?

Write down on mural and then discuss.

Prompts: why have they/have they not gone well, for whom?

Group discussion 2 (25 mins)

Reflections from breakout groups – *ask someone from each group to present summary of what was discussed. Ask about any other successes/challenges*

Q. What examples are there of challenges that have been overcome, and how?

Ask each person around the room and note down on Mural.

Prompts: Who has been involved, who has been affected? Why were they challenges and why did the solutions work?

Break (10 minutes)

Breakout discussions 2 (20 mins)

Q. What have you learnt about NbS approaches and their management/blended finance/carbon science?

Members to jot down ideas on Mural and discuss

Prompts: How did you learn it, were some things easier to learn than others? To what extent and in what circumstances have delivery organisations increased their understanding of blended finance/carbon science/NbS approaches?

Group discussion 3 (25 mins)

Reflections from the breakout groups - *ask someone from each group to present summary of what was discussed.*

Q. How well and in what circumstances have delivery organisations worked well together?

Open-ended question for discussion. ICF team to note down on Mural. Participants use to check if anything missing.

Prompts: in what circumstances, why, who has it worked for, how will learning affect future collaboration?

Group discussion 4 (25 mins)

Q. What are the biggest takeaway or lessons from delivering the programme so far?

Ask collectively and then individually if little discussion (ICF add to the board – check everyone agrees)

Prompts: Who has learned them, how have they learned them, how have they influenced the continuing delivery?

Q. What are the main objectives for the next phase?

Write ideas down on Mural.

Prompt: are they cohesive? What are the plans for dissemination and stakeholder engagement?

Wrap up (5 mins)

Summarise discussions.

Case Studies Topic Guide: Partnership project Leads

Focus and scope of interview:

- Information to build up a case study of your partnership project.
- Cover project activities and progress to date.
- Explore stakeholder engagement efforts and any blended finance work.
- Understand any challenges faced, how you have overcome them and what lessons you have learnt from delivering the project so far.

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

Instructions for interviewers: Each project will have a different number of people covering the project delivery roles. Therefore, the questions in this guide can be asked all to one person or split by the topics and asked to as many people as is relevant. You should ask the introductory questions (1.1), the challenges and lessons learned questions (1.8) and the wrap up questions (1.9) to everyone no matter their role. Interview to take approximately 1 hour for the whole guide. Wherever possible please probe for why something has changed or hasn't changed so that we can relate responses back to our realist TOC and understand the mechanisms.

Introduction

1. Firstly, please can you tell me a bit about your current job role and how it relates to the partnership project?
 - a. Has your role stayed consistent during your time in the project?

Progress

2. What project activities have taken place to date under the Nature Returns funding?
3. What activities are planned for the project over the next 3 months?
4. Is the project running to your original timescales? Why not?
5. Have any activities changed or been adapted? Why/Why not? To what extent?
 - a. Do you think that any of these changes will affect the outcomes of the project? Why/Why not?
6. What has been your approach to governance of the project?
 - a. What has worked well?
 - b. What has worked less well?

Partnerships

7. To date who have you partnered with to deliver the project?
8. Which aspects are they responsible for/ have they contributed to?
9. What benefits has this partnership had for the project and its outcomes?

Impacts

10. What impacts have you identified to date, if any?
11. How have you captured the impact? E.g. through which monitoring activities?
12. What unexpected impacts have there been, if any?
13. What impacts do you think there will be once the work is complete? Short term (1-5 years) and longer term (5 years+)?
 - a. What benefits do you think will be provided for nature/people/community?
14. How do you think the collective impacts of the partnership projects could be monitored and communicated going forwards?

Working with land managers

Questions for GWT, FHT and GW only

Note we are using the term ‘land managers’ to cover landowners, managers of land and tenant farmers in these questions unless otherwise stated.

15. How would you describe your experience of working with different land managers to deliver the project activities?
 - a. How did you encourage participation?
 - b. What challenges, if any were there in getting land managers to participate in the project?
16. What do you think motivated land managers to participate in the project?
 - a. To what extent do you think the experience has been what they were expecting?
 - b. Did they have any concerns about participating? How did you alleviate these?
17. What challenges have there been in working with the land managers once they had agreed to participate?
18. Are there different challenges in working with different types of land managers (landowners, managers and tenant farmers)?
19. Did they participate in all activities as hoped?
20. How do you think participating in the project has affected their view of NBS initiatives?
 - a. How long do you expect this change in view to last?

Stakeholder and community engagement

If the project has a community engagement officer, please ask them these questions.

21. How has the project been engaging with the local community? What activities have you carried out?
22. How did you identify the community groups to engage with? Who have you tried to aim these activities at/ who do you consider the local community that is of interest to you?
23. How do you tailor the activities to the type of person attending?
24. To what extent has working with community groups occurred as you expected? Why not?
25. What challenges have you faced with engaging the community?
26. Is there anything you have changed about the events as the project has progressed?
27. In your experience, how do the community groups perceive the work of the project?
 - a. Do different groups feel different ways?
28. Has community input influenced or changed the way the project has and is being delivered? How?
29. Have you had any involvement with the Nature Returns communications campaign?
 - a. What has this involved?
 - b. How collaborative has this been between yourselves and the programme team?
 - c. How are you using or planning to use the Nature Returns communication outputs?
 - d. What impacts, if any, do you think there will be for your organisation/ this project of being part of a large communications campaign like Nature Returns?

Blended finance

- 30. What have you been doing with EA (Melissa and team) on blended finance?
- 31. How have you found this experience?
- 32. What is your understanding of your project's role in the blended finance work?
- 33. What are you trying to achieve out of this collaboration with EA?
- 34. What would you like to achieve in the long-term regarding private finance?

Working with the programme team

This includes partnership project advisers (Stewart and Natalie), NE: Mike, Mel and team. EA: Melissa. FC: Anna and FC advisers

- 35. At this stage, what is your knowledge of the wider programme and what engagement do you have with Natural England, Defra and other partners?
- 36. How have you found information sharing between partnership projects and is there anything you would like to see done to improve this?
- 37. Did you participate in the partnership project forum in November? How did you find this experience? Was there anything else you would have liked to get out of it?
- 38. Do you think anything could be improved about how the main programme team works with the partnership projects?

Challenges and lessons learned

- 39. What challenges or difficulties have come up as the project has progressed?
- 40. How have you tried to overcome these challenges?
 - a. Are there examples of approaches that have worked and some that have not worked?
- 41. If you were to do a similar project again, what would you do differently?
- 42. What lessons have you learned about:
(ask b and c only if not covered already)
 - a. Implementing NbS interventions
 - b. Stakeholder engagement
 - c. Working with landowners, land managers and tenant farmers (GWT, FWT and GW only)
 - d. Blended finance
 - e. Working with a mixed team of government bodies
- 43. Are there any other key lessons you have learned from this project that you will take forward to future projects?

Wrap up

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

Scoping Topic Guide: Land Managers

Focus and scope of interview:

- Information to build up a case study of the partnership project you are involved with.
- Covering: your reasons for involvement, discussion on the activities which have taken place so far, understanding any challenges you have faced, how you have overcome them and what lessons you have learnt from being part of the project so far.

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

Instructions for interviewers: This guide can be used for landowners, land managers and other farming stakeholders such as tenant farmers who are involved in the partnership project. This is only applicable for the 'Severn Solutions for Nature's Recovery' run by Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust (GWT), the 'Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire Freshwater Network' run by Freshwater Habitats Trust (FHT) and the 'Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change' partnership project run by Groundwork (GW). Please tailor the guide to the interviewee, e.g. tenant farmers to be asked only the questions in bold. Land managers and landowners can be asked all questions (both bold and non-bold). Interview to take approximately 20-30 minutes. Wherever possible please probe for why something has changed or hasn't changed so that we can relate responses back to our realist TOC and understand the mechanisms.

Introduction and motivations

1. Firstly, can you tell me a bit about your job role and involvement in the project? What activities are you carrying out as part of the project?
2. How did you get involved with [insert partnership project lead organisation] and the [insert partnership project name] project?
3. Why did you want to be involved?
4. How do the NbS activities line up with other environmental work (including agri-environment schemes) or actions you might be doing or have previously done? Prompt: AES, landscape recovery projects, local schemes etc

NbS concept

5. Were you aware of nature-based solutions prior to involvement with this project?
6. How has working on this project impacted your knowledge around nature-based solutions?
7. What impacts do you think the nature-based solutions activities could bring to your land (immediate environment), business or local community?
 - a. Has this view changed since the project has started?

Progress and early impacts

8. How are the project activities going so far?
9. Have there been any challenges or barriers to doing the activities?

10. How have you found working with [Insert partnership project lead organisation]?
11. Can you see any impacts already from the work done?

Blended finance

12. Have you had any involvement in the blended finance side of the project working with the Environment Agency?
 - a. What has this involvement been?
13. Do you have reflections on the approach being taken?

Challenges and lessons learned

14. What challenges or difficulties have come up as the project has progressed?
15. How have you tried to overcome these challenges? Are there examples of approaches that have worked and some that have not worked?
16. Are there any key lessons you have learned from this project that you will take forward to future projects?

Wrap up

17. Is there anything else about this project that you would like to talk about today?

Partnership project community workshop guide

Introductions (10 mins)

Researcher 1

- Thank everyone for coming and for their time.
- Researchers to introduce themselves, ICF (*a global consultancy*) and the team (*we work in the Food, Agriculture, Marine and Environment team, and are largely focused on policy research and evaluation for the public sector*)
- Introduce the evaluation.
 - ICF have been commissioned by Natural England and the Environment Agency to undertake an evaluation of the Nature Returns Programme (formerly called NbS for CC at a landscape scale).
 - The NR programme encompasses four workstreams across NE, EA and RBG Kew, and 6 partnership projects across England. The overall purpose is to fund habitat restoration and creation in the partnership project sites with a view to measuring how these activities affect carbon storage and explore opportunities around private funding of conservation works.
 - Your project, the **[Name of partnership project]** is **[Details of partnership project]**
What is the partnership project, how funded, who involved, what hoping to achieve?
 - We are evaluating how the whole NR programme and individual projects have been implemented, what challenges they've faced, what successes they've had and how future projects could be designed.
 - One of the factors we think is key to the success of these nature-based projects is community involvement. And this is what we would like to discuss with you today, specifically:
 - How the project has engaged you, the community, and
 - How the project has affected the wider community.
- Workshop agenda
 - Start with an icebreaker
 - First session on community engagement
 - Break
 - Second session on broader benefits or impacts of the partnership project
 - Time at the end for further feedback
- GDPR: Ask for permission to record the workshop (for note taking purposes only). Remind the participant of the confidential nature of the discussions and that anything said is non-attributable, and that data will be stored and destroyed securely.

Ground rules: Everyone gets their say, if there's anything you want to share but not in a public forum we will share our contact details. We value a diversity of perspectives and are keen to hear about your personal experiences. There are no wrong answers, just opinions.

Icebreaker (10 mins)

Researcher 1

Question: Can you describe, in one sentence, what inspired you to take your photo / join [Name of community group] / become a volunteer etc?

Summarise the reasons mentioned, notice if there are any differences/commonalities.

Session 1 – community engagement (30 mins)

Researcher 1

Introduce purpose and nature of session – we would like to understand what activities the partnership project has organised to involve the local community and we'd like to hear about your opinions on how effective, accessible or enjoyable they were. To explore this, we would like you to list all of the project's community engagement activities that you know of and then we can think about them in terms of which activities have been the best, in your opinion and why (*use post-its for each activity and put on board/table before moving them around to group them*).

Activity: List engagement activities on post-its, group them by enjoyment/effectiveness.

Initial questions:

How have you been involved with [name of project]?

Are there other community engagement activities you know about?

Ask participants to call out and we write them on post-its / Or ask participants to write on the post-its themselves and then we read them out as we put them on a board/table (n.b. write post-its in large letters and make sure everyone can see/read them).

Explain that we will now group the activities by how well they inspired the community to join in and how enjoyable they were, from most to least. Take each individual activity and open up discussions about:

- How did you find them?
- What did you enjoy?
- What would you change?
- Why did you join in?
- How did you hear about it?

Use discussion to suggest where it is placed on the continuum until consensus is reached.

Finish with: Any ideas for other engagement events?

Equipment: post-its, pens, board or table

Take a photo of the board/table

Break (10 mins)

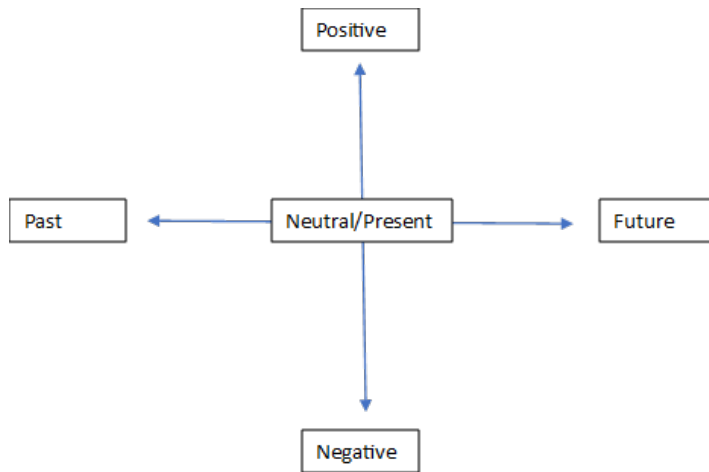
Session 2 – perception of impacts (30 mins)

Researcher 2

Introduce purpose and nature of session – we would like to understand how activities in the partnership project might have a bigger impact than purely nature restoration. In particular, we'd like to know about your experience or knowledge of what benefits or disadvantages the partnership project might bring about to you, the community or wider area. To explore this we would like you to list all of the different changes the project has or might bring about and then we can put them on a graph - with top to bottom showing positive to negative and side to side

showing whether they have occurred in the past, whether they are occurring now or if you think they'll happen in the future (*use tape to create axes and post-its for labels*).

Activity: Get participants in pairs to list (or if discussion is going well then to call out) all of the things the project has or may change for local people, then put them on the board into current or future impacts and negative/positive.



Prompts: environmental, economic, the way you live, the people around you, opportunities, inconveniences, things that have helped or hindered you in any way, your health and wellbeing etc

Questions:

Has the project had any effect or led to any changes to you, the wider area or local community? (prompt: access to green space, jobs, wellbeing, community events etc)

Are these changes positive or negative (could ask respondents to move post-its on grid until reach agreement)?

Who is impacted/affected?

Are there any potential or future impacts not listed?

Does everyone agree with the ordering?

Finish with: *What do you think everyone should know about the work being done here?*

Equipment: Board or table, pens, post-its, tape

Take a photo of the board/table

Further feedback & Wrap up (10 mins)

Summarise the main points.

Thank participants for their time. Share contact details for any further feedback

Topic Guide: Policy Stakeholders Baseline Interviews

Purpose of this study

ICF have been commissioned by Natural England to provide learning support and evaluate the Nature Returns programme.

The Nature Returns programme is a Defra - DESNZ sponsored project, supported by the Treasury's Shared Outcomes Fund and led by Natural England, Environment Agency, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew (RBG Kew) and the Forestry Commission. The project aims to learn about how carbon accumulates or is released from different habitats in different circumstances and explore how to integrate nature-based solutions with other land management objectives, and to make them financially viable. It does so through four workstreams and six partnership projects. The workstreams are:

- WS1: Programme and partnership project management (NE)
- WS2: Comparative assessment of carbon storage and sequestration (NE)
- WS3: Quantifying above and below ground carbon storage (RBG Kew)
- WS4: Blended finance and governance (EA)

Results of the evaluation are being prepared for Spring 2024.

Purpose of this interview

To explore key policy stakeholders' understanding of NbS and relevant topics and how they might engage with the knowledge and data generated by the programme.

To better understand the intended audience for dissemination and influence in terms of their knowledge gaps and preferred forms of communication.

This will help the programme team to formulate their engagement plans going forward and to understand how the data and outcomes of the programme can be best utilised by policy teams.

Consent: Would you also be happy for us to record this interview? The recording is for notetaking purposes and will not be shared outside of the ICF project team. When we write up our final report your personal data will remain anonymous. Data will be reported in aggregate across policy stakeholders. We may use some illustrative quotes in our report, but these will not be attributed to you. Data will be stored securely by ICF and deleted within 12 months of the completion of the evaluation.

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

Introduction

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

NbS and blended finance for nature baseline knowledge

2. Have you come across Nature-based Solutions or blended finance before and what is your understanding of them/it?
 - a. How do they fit with the work of your team?
3. What topics around NbS or BF would you like to know more about and why?
 - a. How might you use this knowledge and what benefits could that create?
4. How do you currently share knowledge between teams?

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

The Nature Returns Programme

5. Had you heard of the Nature Returns programme (formerly Nature-based Solutions for climate change at a landscape scale) prior to this interview? If so, how?
6. *[if yes]* What do you know of the Nature Returns programme?
7. *[if yes, or having heard the description at the start of this interview]* How do you think it might it be useful/beneficial to you and your work, and why?

Wrap up

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

Thank you for your time today. We will be sharing our evaluation report with NE in Spring 2024.
