Nature for Climate Peatland Grant Scheme Process Evaluation

Interim Evaluation - Final Report

May 2024

Natural England Commissioned Report NECR546

NATURAL ENGLAND

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Foreword

The Nature for Climate Peatland Grant Scheme (NCPGS) aims to bring 35,000 ha of degraded peatland under restoration by 2025. Evaluation helps us to understand what works and what needs improving to inform future delivery and policy development. Evaluation of the NCPGS during the scheme lifetime is important to improve delivery of future rounds and scheme processes, and to inform the development of future peatland restoration in line with the ambitions of the England Peat Action Plan.

Natural England commissioned this report to undertake an independent interim process evaluation of the scheme to date. Full evaluation of the NCPGS is planned for the final year of the scheme, which will include both impact and value for money evaluation.

The results presented in this report focus on process evaluation over the first two years of the grant scheme. The report highlights what has and has not worked in terms of scheme delivery to date and improvements that have started and still need to be made.

This report will be used by the NCPGS team in Natural England to improve and refine scheme processes and will be shared with developing grant schemes to share lessons learned. The findings relating to wider barriers and opportunities for peatland restoration will be shared with peatland projects, such as the Peatland Restoration Roadmap, and policy teams, such as Environment Land Management.

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

Executive summary

This report outlines the findings of an interim process evaluation of the Nature for Climate Peatland Grant Scheme (the NCPGS). The NCPGS, one branch of the Nature for Climate Fund (NCF), provides grants to support the restoration of peatland in England. It is administered by Natural England (NE).

The overall objectives of the NCPGS, through its funded projects, are to:

- Reduce emissions from peat by 5.7 megatonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents cumulatively by 2050;
- Establish the process of restoring 35,000 hectares of degraded peat in England by March 2025, in line with the target set in the England Peat Action Plan; and
- Provide wider benefits such as improved ecosystems and biodiversity, better water quality, natural flood management, protection of historic environment features, and connecting people with nature, thereby contributing to the Nature Recovery Network and related initiatives.

Funding through the NCPGS will be available over four years (2021-2025). To date it has undertaken two funding rounds with a third opening for applications in April 2023. In its first two rounds, it offered two types of grants:

- **Discovery Grants**, which are designed to fund preparatory actions that will feed into future Restoration Grant applications (including baseline monitoring and hydrological surveying), and;
- **Restoration Grants,** which are designed to fund landscape scale restoration work on degraded peatlands in England, covering up to 75% of total project costs (typically in the range of £1-2 million per grant).

This interim process evaluation was undertaken halfway through the NCPGS cycle. Its aim is to provide the NCPGS project team with evidence and lessons learned from the delivery of Rounds 1 and 2 that will inform the team's delivery of Round 3. The evaluation draws on a range of evidence sources, including documents and data provided by NE, as well as primary research through semi-structured interviews held with key internal and external stakeholders between January and February 2023.

The evaluation was guided by five primary evaluation questions. The answers to those questions, which are developed in detail in the body of the report, are summarised here.

EQ1: Has Natural England delivered the NCPGS as intended? What worked well, less well, for whom and why?

Natural England has delivered the NCPGS in line with its objectives but via processes that have not always been convenient or efficient. Nevertheless, there have been a number of lessons learned throughout the delivery of the scheme, resulting in process improvements between Rounds 1 and 2.

EQ2: Have Discovery Grants been successful in developing Restoration Grant applications?

On the whole, Discovery Grants have been a successful starting point for future Restoration Grant applications.

EQ3: To what extent have projects achieved their objectives and delivered as intended?

Most projects are achieving their objectives and delivering as intended. Some projects have had to adjust their approach and/or timelines.

EQ4: To what extent has the grant scheme been delivered through partnership working?

The grant scheme has been delivered almost exclusively through partnership working. Several new partnerships have been supported through the NCPGS, where they wouldn't have otherwise had the resource to move forward.

EQ5: To what extent has the grant scheme supported employment and skills development?

The grant scheme has supported good levels of job creation/retention and skills development. Going forward, it will be important for NE to ensure that the opportunities supported by the NCPGS feed into a sustainable long-term legacy plan for employment and skills development in the peatland restoration sector.

In addition to answering these questions, the evaluation highlights important challenges for future policy on peatland restoration, which are of relevance to the Peatland Restoration Roadmap and to future grant programmes. These include:

- The need for **a long-term policy and financing framework** to support peatland restoration;
- The need for **action to develop peatland restoration skills and careers**;
- The importance of **demonstrating viable models for long term management of peatlands**, especially in the lowlands; and
- The need to **enhance private finance for peatland restoration**, including by developing an effective and functioning market for peatland carbon.

Overall, the NCPGS has been effective at supporting landscape-scale restoration of peatland in England, and many of its processes have already been improved since the launch of Round 1 in 2021. In the words of one of the NCPGS grantees:

"The Nature for Climate scheme is welcome and much needed. Yes, there have been issues and complexities around some processes, but don't scrap it and definitely don't give up on it. Getting checks and balances right as a new scheme is always a challenge, but the work this scheme enables is vital."

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1. Introduction

The Nature for Climate Peatland Grant Scheme

England has approximately 1.4 million hectares of peatlands. They provide our largest natural carbon store, are rich in wildlife, and play a valuable role in regulating water quality and preventing flooding. However, they have been degraded by a variety of human pressures, including drainage, air pollution, peat extraction, burning and agricultural improvement. It is estimated that only 13% of England's peatlands are in near-natural condition. Degradation of peatlands depletes their habitat value and contributes to carbon emissions. It also reduces their provision of ecosystem services, such as the regulation of water quality and flows (UK Government, 2021).

The England Peat Action Plan (EPAP), published in May 2021, commits the government to reverse this decline, setting a short-term target to restore 35,000 hectares of peatland by 2025. Peatland restoration will contribute to commitments set out in the 25 Year Plan for the Environment and play an important role in progress towards net zero carbon targets. Natural England is responsible for developing a Peatland Restoration Roadmap later in 2023, which is expected to set out a longer-term trajectory and approach for peatland restoration and recovery.

The Nature for Climate Fund is the principal funding source for nature-based actions to mitigate climate change in England for the period up to 2025. It funds the England Tree Planting Programme, as well as the Nature for Climate Peatland Grant Scheme (NCPGS).

The NCPGS was launched in 2021 and provides funding to restore peatlands in the uplands and lowlands of England. It is a competitive grant scheme that will run until 2025, and is open to environmental groups, local authorities, charities, public bodies, individual landowners and organisations. It is administered by Natural England.

The objectives of NCPGS are to:

- Reduce emissions from peat by 5.7 megatonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents cumulatively by 2050;
- Establish the process of restoring 35,000 hectares of degraded peat in England by March 2025; and
- Provide wider benefits such as improved ecosystems and biodiversity, better water quality, natural flood management, protection of historic environment features, and connecting people with nature, thereby contributing to the Nature Recovery Network and related initiatives.

The NCPGS has so far held two funding rounds, with a third seeking applications in April 2023.

NCPGS Restoration Grants fund landscape scale restoration work on degraded peatlands in England. Restoration Grants normally cover up to 75% of the total project costs and are

typically in the range of £1-2 million per grant. The first two rounds of the programme provided Discovery Grants in addition, which funded actions to form partnerships and projects, build capacity and capability, explore opportunities for private investment funding, and develop site understanding, including baseline monitoring, hydrological and ecological surveys and historic environment assessments.

The grants provided by the NCPGS so far are outlined in Table 1 and 2. Note that each NCPGS project is typically run through a collaboration between several partner organisations. Table 1 and 2 lists the *lead applicant* for each project. For a full list of projects and associated partnership organisations, see Table 87 in the Annex.

Table 1 NCPGS Round 1 grantees and project titles

Grant type	Grant project title (if applicable)	Lead organisation
Discovery	Broads Peatland Partnership	Broads Authority
Discovery	Fens East Peat Partnership	Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust
Discovery	Great North Bog (West)	National Trust
Discovery	Cambridgeshire Fens	NIAB
Discovery	Moors to Restore Partnership	North York Moors National Park Authority
Discovery	Moors for Climate	Peak District National Park Authority
Discovery	Somerset Peatland Partnership	Somerset Wildlife Trust
Discovery	Great Northern Fen (Humberhead Levels Partnership)	Yorkshire Wildlife Trust
Discovery	Dorset Catchment Partnership	Dorset Wildlife Trust
Discovery	Northumberland Peat Partnership	Northumberland Wildlife Trust
Restoration	Border Mires	Forestry England
Restoration	Northern Lowland Peatland Coalition	Lancashire Wildlife Trust
Restoration	South West Peatland Partnership	South West Water
Restoration	Great North Bog (Yorkshire & North Pennines)	Yorkshire Wildlife Trust
Restoration	Nature for Climate Peatland Scheme	RSPB

Table 2 NCPGS Round 2 grantees and project titles

Grant type	Grant project title (if applicable)	Lead organisation
Discovery	Peatland Discovery Grant	Derbyshire Wildlife Trust
Discovery	Northern Lowland Peatland Coalition	Lancashire Wildlife Trust
Discovery	High Peak Discovery Project	National Trust
Discovery	North of England Discovery	North Pennines AONB
Discovery	Wimbledon and Putney Commons Peatland Discovery Project	Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators
Restoration	Great North Bog (West) Peatland Restoration	National Trust
Restoration	Moor Climate Action	Peak District National Park Authority
Restoration	Ridge Graham	Ridge Carbon Capture
Restoration	SPP 2022 Peatland Restoration Project	Somerset Wildlife Trust
Restoration	Humberhead Levels Peatland Restoration Project	Yorkshire Wildlife Trust
Restoration	Great North Bog (Yorkshire & North Pennines) Phase 2	Yorkshire Wildlife Trust

This interim process evaluation forms part of the overall NCPGS evaluation plan

The overall purpose of Natural England's evaluation of the NCPGS is to assess whether the NCPGS has been an effective grant mechanism to deliver on the aims of the England Peat Action Plan: namely, to have 35,000 ha of peatland under restoration and a reduction in emissions of 5.7 $MtCO_2e$ cumulatively by 2050. NE will also assess whether the scheme has done so in a way that represents value for money.

To achieve this, NE will conduct this evaluation in-house alongside externally commissioned work such as this report. Following Magenta Book and Green Book guidance, the complete evaluation of the NCPGS will consist of three components:

- **Process evaluation** to determine how well the grant scheme has been delivered, what worked well and less well, and what could be improved;
- **Impact evaluation** to assess the changes on the ground from peatland restoration; and
- **Value for money evaluation** to examine whether the grant scheme provided value for money and whether restoration outcomes justify the costs of the scheme.

Taken together those evaluations will provide an overall picture of how the NCPGS has performed against its target outcomes. As such, this interim process evaluation contributes to one part of the overall monitoring and evaluation of the scheme. As this report will suggest, a further process evaluation following the completion of the scheme in 2025 – which evaluates the experience of both internal and external stakeholders following Round 3 – should provide NE with a clear opportunity to assess the lessons learned throughout the entire lifecycle of the grant scheme.

The intended audience of this interim process evaluation report

The audience for this evaluation includes stakeholders both internal and external to Natural England.

Natural England's NCPGS Team will take lessons learned from the evaluation to feed back into the design and delivery of the scheme. There is one remaining funding round for Restoration Grants, and the NCPGS team will be able to review the scheme's guidance, templates and focus for this remaining round.

The **Peat Delivery Working Group (NE, Defra & EA)** will use the evaluation to inform decisions on the delivery and risk management of the NCPGS. The evaluation's insights on what is working and what is not will feed into wider thinking and decision making on the England Peat Action Plan.

The **Peat Project Board (NE, Defra, EA & FC)** will use this evaluation to inform strategic decisions on the delivery and risk management of the grant scheme and wider aspects of EPAP delivery.

The **Nature for Climate Fund Programme Board** will use the outcomes of this evaluation to gather an evidence base to report to Ministers and senior stakeholders. This will feed into decision making within the programme's life cycle.

For **Natural England** itself, the evaluation will link to the delivery and evaluation of a number of other workstreams that NE are leading on or contributing to, including schemes on Nature-based Solutions, the Nature Recovery Network, Local Nature Recovery Strategies, the England Peat Map, and Environmental Land Management schemes. The evaluation will also provide learning for the Evaluation Network in NE.

The outcomes of this evaluation will be shared with the **peatland community**, including peat partnerships, researchers, academics, and the public. Lessons learned from the NCPGS interim process evaluation will be relevant for future restoration planning.

For the **government/Defra**, this evaluation will feed into reporting against Net Zero targets and other commitments in the 25 Year Environment Plan. Reporting will also be relevant to Defra priority outcomes.

NE intends to share the outcomes of this evaluation with **grant applicants**, both successful and unsuccessful, in order to foster openness and transparency on lessons learned from the delivery of the scheme so far.

2. Evaluation objectives, approach, scope

Between December 2022 and March 2023, ICF undertook an independent interim process evaluation of the NCPGS. There were three primary objectives of this evaluation.

- First, to determine how well the grant scheme has been delivered to date;
- Second, to explore what had worked well and less well for grantees and for internal stakeholders; and
- Third, to identify improvements that could be made for the remaining delivery of the NCPGS as well as for similar future funds.

The outcomes of this evaluation are detailed in this report. The results will provide NE with robust evidence on the NCPGS processes to date and will identify a set of key lessons to assist in the running of future schemes.

To achieve these objectives, the evaluation draws on two main strands of research:

- **Stakeholder interviews**, conducted over Microsoft Teams between January and February 2023 with 18 of the 26 successful projects and with a range of key internal stakeholders from NE, Defra, and the Environment Agency consulted. The goal of these interviews was to supplement existing available data, and to explore stakeholders' experiences of the grant scheme to date. Interview protocols can be found in Annex 2.
- Analysis of **NE NCPGS data**, including applications, guidance documents, templates, project amendment documentation, and associated project job data.

A full list of the data consulted for this evaluation can be found in Table 4.

The scope of this evaluation concerns the processes of the NCPGS delivery across both Round 1 and Round 2, up to March 2023. It is focused on the NCPGS itself and not on the delivery activities of awarded projects. It explores the experiences of partnerships in their engagement with the scheme and with NE. This includes their experiences at all stages, including pre-application, application, and post-award. Using the data outlined in Table 4, it examines, as far as possible, the successes and challenges of the scheme delivery to date.

We began this process evaluation with a set of five primary evaluation questions (Table 3 Evaluation questions and location of responding evidence in this report. During the initial phases of the evaluation, we mapped the data sources against each evaluation question to ensure that all questions could be answered with the available data.

Alongside this, interview schedules and questions were prepared and agreed in collaboration with NE. Given the small population of NCPGS applicants, a census sample was viable, with all partnerships being invited to interview. For internal stakeholders, a purposive sampling approach was used to engage key individuals involved with the NCPGS. Sampling bias and self-selection bias was minimised through speaking with 18 of

the 26 successful projects across both Discovery Grant and Restoration Grant in Round 1 and Round 2.

All interviews centred on stakeholders' experiences of the NCPGS, with relevant variations in focus between internal and external stakeholders. For external stakeholders – that is, project partnerships – interviews focussed on their engagement with the NCPGS, their views on the interaction between Discovery and Restoration Grants, and their experience of NCPGS processes. For internal stakeholders, interviews focussed on the administration and processes underlying NCPGS delivery to date. A semi-structured interview approach in all instances ensured we were able to compare responses across interviews, whilst maintaining flexibility to explore particular issues in further detail as necessary. A thematic analysis of interview notes was conducted to identify salient themes.

In this report, we respond to each evaluation question to the extent permitted by the available evidence. Given that the NCPGS is at the mid-way point of its delivery, some questions are supported by more detailed and concrete evidence than others. Throughout the report, we aim to indicate the strength of the available evidence associated with each conclusion that we draw.

The evaluation questions

The final set of evaluation questions and sub-questions for this interim process evaluation, which were developed in collaboration with NE and guide the structure of this report, are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Evaluation questions and location of responding evidence in this report

Evaluation question	Report section and page number* (cross-referenced) *These page numbers link to the first page of relevant section(s) and subsection(s)
EQ1: Has NE delivered the NCPGS as intended? What worked well, less well, for whom and why?	EQ1 Section – pg. 19
Did the application process work well, and was it delivered as intended?	pg. 21; pg. 22; pg. 25; pg. 25
Was the grant delivery process as intended and proportionate?	pg. 21; pg. 22; pg. 25; pg. 25
Are the scheme processes proportionate for the value of the grants offered?	pg. 21; pg. 22; pg. 25; pg. 25
What lessons have been learnt that could improve the processes of funding peatland restoration in future?	pg. 31

Evaluation question	Report section and page number* (cross-referenced) *These page numbers link to the first page of relevant section(s) and subsection(s)
To what extent have the following been appropriately considered within grant projects? ■ Historic environment (HE) ■ Protected sites ■ Monitoring	pg. 26
Has the inclusion of the historic environment requirement improved the protection of HE features and avoided damage, in comparison to previous restoration grants?	pg. 26
To what extent has the NCPGS engaged successfully?	pg. 25; pg. 27
Has the grant scheme been open and transparent to an audience beyond the `usual players' of peat restoration?	pg. 25
Are there any relevant audiences the grant scheme has not reached yet?	pg. 25
To what extent has the additional funding requirement of the NCPGS been met using private finance and the Peatland Code?	pg. 29
EQ2: Have discovery grants been successful in developing restoration grant applications?	EQ2 Section – pg. 34
To what extent do organisations submitting Restoration Grant applications benefit from previously having a Discovery Grant?	pg. 35; pg. 39; pg. 39
EQ3: To what extent have projects achieved their objectives and delivered as intended?	EQ3 Section – pg. 40
Have project objectives changed during the course of the grant scheme and why?	pg. 41
Did projects deliver at their intended timescales?	pg. 41
Have restoration activities been delivered as intended?	pg. 41; pg. 41
Have external factors impacted the delivery of restoration activities?	pg. 41; pg. 41
EQ4: To what extent has the grant scheme been delivered through partnership working?	EQ4 Section – pg. 42
To what extent has the NCPGS facilitated partnership working on peatland restoration and newer peat partnerships to bid for restoration funding?	pg. 43
To what extent have partnerships engaged/sought advice (and from whom)?	pg. 44; pg. 44
Is there sufficient guidance for new peat partnerships to deliver restoration?	pg. 44; pg. 44

Evaluation question	Report section and page number* (cross-referenced) *These page numbers link to the first page of relevant section(s) and subsection(s)
What extent of restoration activities were undertaken prior to NCPGS (e.g. agri-environment schemes, Heritage Lottery Funding, EU LIFE funding?)	pg. 43
EQ5: To what extent has the grant scheme supported employment and skills development?	EQ5 Section – pg. 47
To what extent has the NCPGS supported `green jobs'?	pg. 48; pg. 49; pg. 50; pg. 51
How have the projects supported the development of skills relevant to the peatland restoration sector?	pg. 51
To what extent has the supplier and contractor base for peatland restoration been increased?	pg. 51

The evidence consulted

Table 4 displays the evidence consulted during this evaluation and the associated rationale for analysing each source of evidence. Unless otherwise specified, it should be assumed that each source of evidence was reviewed for all funding rounds and all applications submitted to the NCPGS as of the end of Round 2.

Table 4 Evidence consulted during this evaluation.

Evidence type	Purpose of evidence
Applications to the NCPGS	The content of applications to the NCPGS showed us how applicants **interpreted and responded to NCPGS application guidance**.
Application guidance and templates	Application guidance and templates showed how the instructions provided to applicants have **evolved over time**. In addition to the guidance documents for Rounds 1 and 2, we were able to review the recently published guidance for Round 3.
Application scores and evaluator feedback	Application scores and evaluator feedback allowed us to assess **whether applicants were meeting NE's criteria**. Areas which received consistently high or low scores highlighted aspects of the process that were **especially clear or unclear** for applicants**. Evaluator feedback was more detailed for some rounds than others. This is a reflection of steps taken by Natural England to streamline their internal process and reporting between Round 1 and subsequent rounds.
Applicant clarification questions	In both funding rounds, NCPGS applicants were provided with an opportunity to ask clarification questions of Natural England representatives. These clarification questions highlighted areas of the NCPGS process that were **difficult for applicants to navigate**.

Evidence type	Purpose of evidence
Amendment requests and relevant excerpts of project amendment documents	Natural England provided us with information on amendments that have been made to ongoing projects, including relevant excerpts of official project amendment documents. We reviewed these amendments to **identify whether projects have been delivering as intended.**
Grant reporting and claims guidance and templates	Guidance and templates for NCPGS grant reporting and claims gave us insight into the **processes navigated by grantees during the delivery stage** of their projects.
Available data on organisations that viewed the Invitation to Apply	This data allowed us to compare **those who viewed the Invitation to Apply** to the NCPGS against **those who ended up submitting applications**.
Application summary data	This data included, for each round of the NCPGS: the number of applications received, the number of successful applications, and the number of unsuccessful applications for each round. It provided an **overview of how NCPGS applications have progressed to successful grants**.
Job creation and retention data	We were provided with data on the number of direct and indirect jobs created and retained due to the NCPGS grants issued so far. Although the data for Round 2 was not comprehensive enough to analyse, the Round 1 data provided a **snapshot of how the NCPGS has been supporting employment and skills development** in the peatland restoration sector so far.
Semi-structured interviews with successful grant applicants	Between 16 January 2023 and 24 February 2023, semi-structured interviews were held with 18 of the 26 successfully funded projects. These interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams and typically lasted for one hour. Interviews focussed on the grantees' journey through the application process. Questions focussed on applicants' awareness of and engagement with the scheme at the pre-application stage, the application process itself, and the post-award processes supporting NCPGS delivery. From transcriptions of the interviews, we undertook a qualitative thematic analysis of the data **to identify salient and recurring themes and issues**.
Semi-structured interviews with unsuccessful applicants	We interviewed one of the three unsuccessful applicants to the NCPGS. To ensure comparability, this interview followed the same structure as those undertaken with successful applicants, but focussed on the **applicant's experience up to the point where they were notified that their application had been unsuccessful**.
Semi-structured interviews with internal stakeholders	Additional semi-structured interviews were held with multiple internal stakeholders from the Natural England Peat team, Defra Peat Team, and the Environment Agency. These interviews were held between 9 January 2023 and 3 February 2023 over Microsoft Teams and typically lasted for one hour. Questions focussed on the internal stakeholders' understanding and experiences of the scheme to date. The goal was to **identify aspects of the scheme that were running well and areas that would benefit from improvements**.
Internal stakeholder workshop	An online workshop was held on 2 March 2023 and attended by 16 stakeholders from Defra, Natural England, and the Environment Agency.

Evidence type	Purpose of evidence
	Participants were asked to identify barriers to peatland restoration and challenges to meeting the government's ambitions in the England Peat Action Plan. The main groups of barriers and challenges identified related to: • Land use – gaining access and permissions to work on restoration of peatlands; • Finance, including costs, security of long-term funding, financial uncertainty and access to private finance and carbon markets; • Sector capacity, knowledge and skills; • Climate and water, including the effects of climate change on peatlands and challenges relating to water resource planning and management; and • Process and practicalities, particularly relating to the complexity and delivery challenges of peatland projects. For each of these topics, participants identified enabling actions that could help to reduce barriers and address the challenges identified, as well as potential risks and opportunities that could affect peatland restoration in future. **The challenges, barriers, enabling actions, risks and opportunities identified can help to inform the development and delivery of peatland grant schemes in future**.

3. Evaluation findings

The following chapter contains the evaluation findings of the interim process evaluation. This chapter will begin by exploring evaluation question 1 (EQ1), working through its associated sub-questions one by one to provide an overarching response to EQ1. The discussion of EQ1 will end with an overview of lessons learned and a summary of findings. Following this, the chapter will move on to EQ2 and repeat the same structure for each evaluation question.

EQ1: Has Natural England delivered the NCPGS as intended? What worked well, less well, for whom and why?

> **EQ1 – Key Takeaways**
>
> Overall, NE has delivered the NCPGS as intended, but via processes that have not always been convenient or easy for applicants to navigate. NE has listened and responded to feedback received throughout the delivery of the scheme to date and has made multiple improvements to the scheme's processes between Rounds 1 and 2. However, there are still areas where further improvements could be made.

This section of the report examines the first evaluation question and its associated sub-questions – that is, to what extent Natural England have delivered the NCPGS as intended, and what aspects of the scheme have worked well, and less well, for whom, and why. Table 5 contains a list of the associated evaluation sub-questions and their location within this section.

Table 5 The sub-questions of Evaluation Question 1

Evaluation sub-question	Report subsection and page number* (cross-referenced) *These page numbers link to the first page of relevant subsection(s)
Did the application process work well, and was it delivered as intended?	pg. 21; pg. 22; pg. 25; pg. 25
Was the grant delivery process as intended and proportionate?	pg. 21; pg. 22; pg. 25; pg. 25
Are the scheme processes proportionate for the value of the grants offered?	pg. 21; pg. 22; pg. 25; pg. 25

Evaluation sub-question	Report subsection and page number* (cross-referenced) *These page numbers link to the first page of relevant subsection(s)
What lessons have been learnt that could improve the processes of funding peatland restoration in future?	pg. 31
To what extent have the following been appropriately considered within grant projects? • Historic environment (HE) • Protected sites • Monitoring	pg. 26
Has the inclusion of the historic environment requirement improved the protection of HE features and avoided damage, in comparison to previous restoration grants?	pg. 26
To what extent has the NCPGS engaged successfully?	pg. 25; pg. 27
Has the grant scheme been open and transparent to an audience beyond the `usual players' of peat restoration?	pg. 25
Are there any relevant audiences the grant scheme has not reached yet?	pg. 25
To what extent has the additional funding requirement of the NCPGS been met using private finance and the Peatland Code?	pg. 29

Our key findings are:

- Legacy issues from Round 1 are still being felt at this stage of the scheme, although NE have responded in various ways;
- There has been a clear improvement in guidance and templates between application rounds;
- Overall, improvements to the application guidance and templates between Round 1 and Round 2 are reflected in a decrease in the number of applicants asking the same or very similar clarification questions in Round 2 compared to Round 1.

Many applicants to Discovery Round 1, for example, asked about what content should be included in different sections of the application form – including where to attach a table detailing the locations of proposed sites, and whether that table would count towards the application page limit. These kinds of clarificatory questions about the structure and intended use of the application templates were less common in Round 2.

- Administrative aspects of the scheme have been challenging to navigate, especially for newer partnerships;
- The claims and payments system is the single largest process issue with NCPGS delivery so far, although improvements are underway;

- Applicants' consideration of historic environment (HE), protected sites, and monitoring was generally adequate, with room for improvement;
- to prevent issues in future rounds.
- Most applications are seen to lack a strategic approach to securing long-term private finance;
- Application questions and templates could be made more precise;
- Overlap between questions could be decreased; and
- Application guidance could be clearer about the reasons why the NCPGS will not conflict with other funding schemes.

Legacy issues from Round 1 are still being felt at this stage of the scheme, although NE have responded in various ways

Although multiple improvements have been made over the course of the NCPGS so far, both internal stakeholders and successful applicants highlighted certain issues that emerged during Round 1 and continue to impact NCPGS delivery (see Table 6). NE has worked to respond and mitigate these issues in various ways and appears to be in a good position going into Round 3.

Table 6 Legacy issues from Round 1 of scheme delivery

Issue	Response
Successful Round 1 applicants were informed later in the year than anticipated, cutting into the first part of the intended Round 1 delivery window.	NE improved the timeliness of its response for Round 2, informing applicants of the Discovery Grants of their intent to award in October. For Round 3, NE is better placed to ensure that the timeline for informing successful applicants allows work to take place in the first delivery window.
Applicants were challenged by 'clunky' application templates that are difficult to edit.	Templates have been updated and streamlined between Round 1 and Rounds 2 and 3, but they could still be streamlined further – for example, by reducing the level of duplication required by clearly differentiating the application questions.
Round 1 application guidance was extensive, in some cases too much so – some simpler explainers were needed.	Guidance has been made clearer and more precise between Round 1 and Rounds 2, but could still be shortened and clarified further.
A lack of capacity in the NE peat team delayed the team's responses to applicants.	NE has increased its internal capacity to a level that should be sufficient to ensure faster processing and response times.
The application process for Rounds 1 and 2 was potentially exclusionary for certain actors, particularly at a site level where landowners/farmers are likely to have limited to no knowledge of navigating grant application systems.	Whilst the NCPGS is open and available to anyone wanting to restore peatland, the primary target audience has been partnerships with a focus on landscape scale restoration. If future schemes wish to focus on smaller sizes, then work will be needed from NE to ensure that the scheme is tailored appropriately.
Applicants found the application portal for Rounds 1 and 2 (Bravo) unintuitive to navigate.	A new procurement portal has been adopted for Round 3.

There has been a clear improvement in guidance and templates between application rounds

In line with NE's efforts noted in Table 6, application templates and guidance for the NCPGS have improved significantly since the start of the scheme, with especially pronounced improvement between Round 1 and Round 2 (for the most part, Round 2 and Round 3 templates and guidance are very similar). These improvements are the result of multiple washup sessions conducted by the NCPGS team following Round 1 to identify areas for improvement.

Many of these changes are relatively simple but demonstrate that NE are receptive to feedback from scheme applicants. Collectively, minor changes to the guidance and templates have significantly improved the clarity and efficiency of the application process, both for applicants and for NE evaluators who are tasked with scoring applications. See Table 7 for the main improvements made to guidance and templates between Round 1 and Round 2.

Specific examples of improvements to *application guidance writing style*, *application template structure*, and *application question specificity* are highlighted in even more detail in Spotlight 1, Spotlight and Spotlight immediately following Table 7.

Table 7 Improvements made to guidance and templates between Rounds 1 and 2

Round 1	Round 2
Application questions are broad. **eg Outline the ambition for peatland restoration in this area.** **Result – broad, unfocused responses that are not targeted at the most relevant points.**	Application questions are clearer with more detail on what evaluators are looking for. eg Outline the ambition for peatland restoration in this area, describing its future state and contribution to climate, landscape and biodiversity resilience. Result – clearer answers, targeted at the most relevant points.
Guidance is provided in prose-style text and application templates are unstructured. **Result – broad answers, lack of focus, duplication of text, and responses that are not targeted at the most relevant points.**	Guidance makes effective use of bullet points and application templates make effective use of tables. Result – key points of the guidance stand out, applicants have a clearer sense of what information they need to provide, and the key points of applicant answers are easier for evaluators to extract.
Application questions overlap significantly. **Result – answers are repetitive, making applications more cumbersome to write and score.**	Application questions overlap less. Result – answers are less repetitive, making applications less cumbersome to write and score.
No targeted questions on private finance. **Result – vague information on applicants' plans to access private finance.**	Several targeted questions on private finance. Result – clearer information on how applicants plan to access private finance and where they are in that process.

Spotlight 1

Application guidance writing style

An example of what has been significantly improved between rounds

Round 1 guidance was provided in prose-style text, which made its key points difficult to extract (see Figure 1 for the Restoration Round 1 guidance on the first application question, "What will you achieve?"). Guidance in Rounds 2 and 3 used bullet points to explain exactly what applicants should include in their answers. See, for example, the Restoration Round 2 guidance on how to answer the same application question, "What will you achieve?" (Figure 2). Small changes like this have helped to make the application process much clearer to navigate.

Figure 1 Restoration Round 1 E01 guidance.

What will you achieve?

Applicants are asked to provide an outline of their project, including the project aims and restoration objectives, which should align with the aims of the grant scheme. The project aims should be the long-term overarching vision for the project, for example to restore a number of hectares of drained lowland raised bog using rewetting and revegetation best practice. The restoration objectives of a project are the short and medium-term desired results of activities implemented during the project, which will help the project aim to be realised. For example, to raise water levels through the creation of peat cell bunding and to re-establish peatland vegetation on bare peat using a moss-rich nurse crop enhanced with *Sphagnum* species.

The total CO_2e to be secured from the project should be taken from the environmental benefits carbon calculator provided for question 5 (annex D of the online ITA).

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This question provides applicants with the opportunity to provide the context for the proposed project, including the partners involved, demonstrating understanding of the restoration journey and the role/place of the project in that. The context of the project should include why restoration is necessary for the conservation of the site and how the conservation objectives of protected sites have been considered (see resources for publication links). The project outline should be a non-technical description of your overall bid which can be understood by non-specialists.

Figure 2 Restoration Round 2 E01 guidance.

E01: What will you achieve?

You must give an outline of your project, showing:

- how it meets the aims of the NCPGS
- the partners involved
- why restoration is necessary on the site, or sites
- the restoration journey and the role of the project in it
- the role of any previous NCPGS projects
- that you have considered the conservation objectives of protected sites

You should give a non-technical description, which non-specialists could understand.

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You must include:

- project title
- project aims – the long-term vision for the project
- restoration objectives – the short and medium-term results of project activities, which will help realise the project aim

For example:

- project aim – to restore a number of hectares of drained lowland raised bog using rewetting and revegetation best practice
- restoration objectives – to create peat cell bunding to raise water levels, and use a moss-rich nurse crop enhanced with *Sphagnum* species to re-establish peatland vegetation

You need to include the total area and carbon dioxide equivalent that the project aims to secure. You can get this from the environmental benefits carbon calculator. See E05: Environmental benefits - carbon.

Spotlight 2

Application template structure

An example of what has been significantly improved between rounds

The structure of NCPGS application templates has also improved significantly between rounds – in particular, between Rounds 1 and 2.

For example, for Restoration Round 2's question on the legacy of the NCPGS, applicants were provided with a table to fill in. The table encouraged each applicant to break down their legacy plans by type of future funding (grants, schemes, private, other) and by status (idea, action planned, action taken, secured). This made it easy for NE to see what types of future funding were being proposed and whether those sources were planned or already secured.

The equivalent question for Restoration Round 1 asked applicants to provide a legacy plan for their project but without any guidance on how they should structure their answers. The result was prose-style answers which differed significantly between applicants in clarity, focus, and level of detail.

Spotlight 3

Application question specificity

An example of what has been significantly improved between rounds

Many application questions have been made more specific, and therefore clearer, between rounds – especially between Rounds 1 and 2.

The guidance for Restoration Round 2 E02, for example, specified that it was asking applicants for *a summary of baseline data collected and associated constraints*, a *summary of restoration methodologies proposed across all sites*, and *justification for the techniques proposed*.

This is a clear improvement on the Round 1 guidance for the same question, which asked applicants to:

"Please describe your project approach including a plan, timetable and methodology for the proposed peatland restoration and associated monitoring,"

but without any further guidance on what should be included.

Overall, improvements to the application guidance and templates between Round 1 and Round 2 are reflected in a decrease in the number of applicants asking the same or very similar clarification questions in Round 2 compared to Round 1.

Many applicants to Discovery Round 1, for example, asked about what content should be included in different sections of the application form – including where to attach a table detailing the locations of proposed sites, and whether that table would count towards the application page limit. These kinds of clarificatory questions about the structure and intended use of the application templates were less common in Round 2.

Administrative aspects of the scheme have been challenging to navigate, especially for newer partnerships

At times, applicants have found the volume of documentation required by the scheme challenging to navigate. This was a key issue for applicants to Round 1 (both Discovery and Restoration), when guidance was unavailable until the opening of the application window. As such, partnerships were unable to prepare or plan, and they faced challenges in collecting the required evidence during a narrow application window. This improved for Round 2, with guidance issued in January ahead of the application window opening in April. This ensured potential applicants had time to work through the guidance and seek support ahead of the opening of the window. Similarly, for Round 3, guidance was issued in February ahead of the application window in April.

Newer partnerships in particular noted that they would have benefitted from more concise documentation from Natural England. Given their limited resources and capacity, they struggled to work through the amount of documentation and annexes provided by NE. One partnership knew of an organisation which had chosen not to apply to the NCPGS, despite satisfying all of the eligibility requirements, due to a lack of internal capacity to handle the burden of the application process.

Even larger partnerships noted that it took substantial effort to ensure that all of their partner organisations had the same understanding of what was needed. They noted that clearer explainers, or shorter documents outlining the primary points of the scheme, would have helped. Multiple well-established partnerships expressed concern about how smaller or newly established partnerships would fare when navigating the application process.

The claims and payments system is the single largest process issue with NCPGS delivery so far, although improvements are underway

The claims and payments system is the single largest process issue with the NCPGS delivery to date, though multiple improvements to the system have already been made, and others are currently underway.

Issues with claims and payments have been a persistent problem since Round 1, with many partnerships facing substantial delays in receiving their payments. Such delays represent a significant risk to the NCPGS. Delayed payments can present major cashflow

problems, with costs incurred prior to receipt of funds leading to a risk of debt for organisations without a significant cash buffer. Whilst many partnerships have been able to financially absorb NCPGS costs until payments are made, smaller partnerships or those with limited financial reserves have gone through periods of being extremely anxious about whether they would be able to continue their planned work.

Consequently, several partnerships expressed that they had lost some faith in the payments and claims process, and many expressed frustration at the situation. A small number of partnerships were uncertain about whether they would want to, or even be able to, pursue future rounds of funding due to the cashflow risks presented by delays to Round 1 and Round 2 claims and payments.

It is important to note that most partnerships still hold high levels of goodwill towards the NCPGS. Most recognise that the issues that they have experienced with claims and payments can be traced back to the NCPGS being a new funding stream. They recognise that the situation will improve in the future as NE works to streamline the NCPGS process and develop clearer guidance documents.

Two developments that have already been made will likely help to improve the claims and payments process. First, NE issued new, clearer guidance on payments and claims in December 2022. Whilst this evaluation was undertaken prior to the new guidance being extensively used, initial impressions from grantees were positive. Second, NE has expanded the NCPGS claims and payments team in response to their recognition that they had been operating with limited internal capacity to deal with grantees' payments and claims. This increased capacity should improve the responsiveness of the team in issuing future payments.

Delays aside, grantees offered mixed responses on the level of detail required in the NCPGS claims process. Most partnerships understood the requirements overall, though some felt that too much detail was required, and that this represented a lack of trust between the NE peat team and their grantees. Grantees who had prior experience with other UK-based schemes, including the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and the National Heritage Lottery Fund, felt that the evidencing requirements of the NCPGS were excessive. Grantees who had prior experience with EU-funded projects, by contrast, were more comfortable with the level of information required by the NCPGS. They felt that some areas of the NCPGS process were less burdensome in comparison to the process for EU LIFE funding, for example, which requires grantees to break down staff day costs.

Applicants' consideration of historic environment (HE), protected sites, and monitoring was generally adequate, with room for improvement

Applicants' consideration of HE, protected sites, and monitoring was generally considered adequate by evaluators. However, evaluators felt that many applications could have addressed these factors in more detail.

A lack of consideration of HE or protected site designations was cited by evaluators for all three rejected Discovery Round 1 applications, for example. Insufficient attention to one or

more of protected site designations and consents, ecological/protected species barriers, overlapping designation barriers, and/or HE were cited by evaluators even for many accepted applications – including eight out of ten accepted Discovery Round 1 applications.

Some Round 1 applicants mistakenly assumed that the required consents for their proposed work would be automatically provided upon receipt of an NCPGS grant, despite explicit acknowledgement in the application guidance that all consents would need to be secured separately. The NCPGS team has further emphasised this in future guidance to avoid confusion.

For the most part, any application-stage issues with HE, protected sites and monitoring have been dealt with during project delivery. Most partnerships have substantial experience navigating such requirements and were comfortable doing so. A small number of partnerships noted that they would have appreciated greater levels of flexibility, particularly around environmental monitoring requirements (for example with vegetation monitoring that can be contextual across landscape and sites), given their substantial experience in the domain.

However, grantees recognised that the NE peat team had been responsive and willing to engage in several fruitful conversations on this issue. Multiple well-established partnerships noted that further guidance on monitoring and consents would likely be beneficial for new partnerships, and this was reinforced in conversations with newly established partnerships themselves. Whilst newer partnerships may have some level of familiarity with consents and permissions, more focussed guidance would have been appreciated, particularly on areas like watercourses and powerlines that are especially relevant to the NCPGS.

Whilst partnerships expressed a high level of familiarity with SSSI consenting, a small number noted that they had received conflicting information from local NE coordinators on the timeline of installing hydrological monitoring equipment. This resulted in challenges to ensuring the availability of contractors and the required equipment. Some projects then had to submit project revision documents and delay their planned works.

Engagement from the national NE peat team has improved over time, with pre-application activities proving to be especially useful

Several partnerships felt that the national NE peat team was at times disconnected from local NE coordinators regarding the requirements and processes of the NCPGS. These partnerships recognised that local coordinators have a wide range of responsibilities and duties that extend beyond the NCPGS. However, particularly around matters of consenting and permissions, inconsistencies in communication and understanding between partnerships, local NE teams, and the central NE peat team sometimes led to issues with project delivery.

Nevertheless, several partnerships emphasised that local NE teams have been easily reachable, proactive, and helpful at resolving issues that fell within their scope. Overall,

whilst these experiences vary across regions, most partnerships spoke positively of the work done by local NE teams.

All partnerships spoke very positively of the engagement from the national NE peat team at the pre-application stage of the process, with pre-application webinars highlighted as particularly useful. Those webinars provided a welcome forum for applicants to ask questions and access information efficiently.

Spotlight 2

Spotlight: Webinars

An example of what has worked well.

Natural England have run multiple webinars as pre-application engagement activities. They have included introductory events as well as sessions focussing on the Historic Environment and the Peatland Code.

Most applicants spoke very positively of these webinars, describing them as accessible, useful, and a key source of additional information on different components of the application process. Newer partnerships with limited experience in navigating certain areas, including the Historic Environment requirements, found the webinars especially valuable. Most partnerships welcomed the opportunity to ask questions in an open forum, and emphasised the value of being able to access and share webinar materials afterwards for the benefit of partners who were unable to attend live.

NE should continue to offer these types of engagement activities and ensure that they maintain accessibility in their communications to prospective applicants. A small number of partnerships mentioned that additional webinars or peer learning sessions would be useful, where a range of other topics could be explored – including project methodology.

At the project delivery stage, however, it seems that the national NE peat team's engagement with project teams has been inconsistent. A lack of responsiveness from the generic peatland email inbox was highlighted by many partnerships as a primary issue. One partnership during Round 1 described it as a 'black hole', explaining that they would wait weeks to receive a response, with no assurance that their email had even been received.

A small number of partnerships noted that they had no choice but to 'get on with the work' before receiving a response to their questions – as by continuing to wait, they would have jeopardised the intended timeline of their project. Those partnerships were then understandably worried that the work they had undertaken would not end up being in line with the NE peat team's expectations.

All partnerships emphasised that when they did receive communications from the NE peat team, their experience was positive. Most felt that any communication issues were a result of limited capacity within NE rather than indifference from the national team.

The national NE peat team have responded to this and adjusted their communication process. They have added holding emails to provide assurance that incoming emails have been received, and they have overall improved response rates from their inbox. To improve communication further, the NE peat team have introduced a direct contact point for urgent and time-sensitive issues that might arise during NCPGS project delivery, though not all partnerships were aware of this. As such, clearer communication on who this direct point of contact is, and introduction of a secondary backup point of contact, would improve the team's level of engagement with grantees. This aligns with suggestions made by several partnerships over the course of our evaluation.

Several partnerships spoke very positively of the quarterly progress meetings with the NE peat team. A small number of partnerships noted that they were not used to funders engaging in this manner. But those partnerships emphasised that the meetings offered an opportunity to discuss issues that had arisen, and that they helped to ensure projects remained on track.

One partnership noted that site visits from the national team offered a particularly useful setting for grantees to explain their work to date and discuss any ongoing issues. This partnership felt it was important for the national team to have first-hand experience of the work that was underway.

A small number of partnerships noted that early in the process, staff turnover within the NE national team resulted in communication issues and previously agreed meetings failing to carry over into the calendars of new staff. Whilst such issues have been remedied since, the NE team should continue to implement excellent staff handover practices to prevent issues in future rounds.

Most applications are seen to lack a strategic approach to securing long-term private finance

NCPGS Restoration Grants normally require applicants to source 25% of their total project funding from non-Treasury sources. Ideally, in line with the government's Green Finance Strategy and its long-term aim to support the development of a self-sustaining private natural capital market, much of that 25% would be met by return-generating private finance mechanisms like the Peatland Code.

This seems to have presented a challenge to most NCPGS applicants so far. Most NCPGS applicants, even in Restoration Round 2, are at an early stage in their engagement with private finance, including the Peatland Code. Most applications secured match funding from within their partnership to satisfy a significant proportion of the additional funding requirement.

Where applicants have been able to secure investment from private companies, this has typically been from utilities companies who are landowners in the proposed restoration area or who have a vested interest in improving water quality in that area.

Many applicants and grantees have shown that they are open to engaging with the Peatland Code, but most are in the early stages of that engagement. Most proposed NCPGS sites are not yet registered with the Code. Furthermore, several grantees noted the relative immaturity of the carbon market and the challenge in communicating its value to landowners and managers. Many grantees felt there lacked clear evidence and success cases of the Peatland Code to demonstrate a viable source of long-term funding.

One significant gap in the Peatland Code, which has posed a problem for several NCPGS grantees, is its coverage of lowland peatland. Version 1 of the Peatland Code did not include lowland peatland and as such was not a viable source of funding for such sites. Version 2 of the Peatland Code was launched on 8 March 2023 and does now include lowland peatland, but given the short time between its launch and the application window for Round 3, there is a very limited opportunity for sites to consider the detail of the new Code and how it might work for them.

A small number of grantees had worked with private companies to assess the financial viability of entering sites into the Peatland Code and ultimately found that their sites would not be financially viable under the Code in its current form. Grantees have noted that other barriers to engaging with the Peatland Code include:

- A lack of clarity on the relationship between the Peatland Code and other future funding schemes; and

- Low prices for Peatland Code credits currently being offered by buyers.

Spotlight 3 highlights improvements that could be made to clarify guidance on private finance for future rounds.

Spotlight 3

Guidance on private finance

An example of what could be improved in future

Restoration grants require 25% of the total project budget to be supplied by non-Treasury sources. Many applicants expressed concern or confusion around this requirement. Issues included:

- A lack of clarity about *why* NE had put this match funding requirement in place;

- A lack of clarity on the Peatland Code; and

- A lack of clarity on the future of public funding for peatland restoration.

In future rounds, NE could provide much clearer guidance on private finance options for peatland restoration. Guidance documents for Rounds 2 and 3 do include a helpful section on "Using the Peatland Code alongside the NCPGS". Round 3 guidance also includes a helpful update on how the Peatland Code approaches lowland peat. However, much more progress could be made.

For future rounds, NE could **clearly explain their motivation for including a 25% private finance requirement**, so that applicants understand the reasons behind what they are being asked to do. This could help to build goodwill among applicants, who at the moment see the private finance requirement as onerous and arbitrary.

In guidance for future rounds, NE could also include **examples of private finance success stories**. This would give applicants a sense of their available options.

Lessons learnt

As already noted, NE has made several improvements to the application process between Rounds 1 and 2. Further improvements could be made in future rounds, with the aim of making the process less burdensome for both applicants and Natural England. Three specific recommendations are detailed here.

Application questions and templates could be made more precise

Even in Round 2, some application questions proved to be ambiguous or unclear. For example, applicants to Restoration Round 2 were asked to answer the question, "Site Entering Peatland Code?", for every proposed project site.

This question represents a step in the right direction compared to the vaguer questions of Round 1, in the sense that it prompted applicants to give targeted information about their engagement with private finance. However, the question is inherently unclear, and applicants' answers to it were therefore much less informative than they could have been.

In particular, for a site to be "entering" the Peatland Code, does it have to be registered with the Code already? Or does a site count as "entering" the Code if the applicant has *plans* to register it with the Code? What if they are open to the idea of registering with the Code?

A lack of clarity on which of these interpretations was the one intended by Natural England meant that some applicants answered "yes" to the "Site Entering Peatland Code?" question even for sites that were not yet registered. Equally, some answered "no" even though they had clearly expressed plans to register sites with the Code.

Overlap between questions could be decreased further

Even in Round 2, applicants' answers to the application questions were often repetitive. Repetition was especially common between the first application question, E01, and other questions.

Some grantees were unsure whether different application questions would be assessed by different evaluators. They therefore felt a need to briefly summarise their project at the beginning of each of each answer. It would be easy for NE to reassure applicants, in the guidance for future rounds, that repetition between questions is not necessary.

Even where applicants were not intentionally repeating themselves, several felt that they were having to rehash the same or very similar material multiple times due to the overlapping scope of application questions. This added to the burden of putting an application together, especially for third sector organisations with limited resources.

NE could work to reduce the number and length of application questions where possible. NE could aim to ensure that all questions which do remain for future rounds are as mutually exclusive as possible.

Application guidance could be clearer about the reasons why the NCPGS will not conflict with other funding schemes

Many applicants and/or land managers are concerned or confused about the relationship between the NCPGS and other funding schemes, including schemes that have not been rolled out yet.[1]

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[1] For the purposes of this report, 'land manager' will be used to refer to both landowners and tenants.

The Restoration Round 1 guidance, for example, made the following statement on the NCPGS and other schemes:

> "There is no need for concern about how peatland restored now will be treated in these future schemes and certainly no reason to delay peatland restoration. To respond to the climate emergency, we need you to restore peat now."

Similar statements were made in response to applicant clarification questions about future schemes. The above quote, however, does not do much to explain *why* applicants should not worry about future schemes, or *what* the government will be doing to safeguard land managers' interests.

Providing further clarity on this issue is especially important in light of the fact that applicants to the NCPGS need land managers' approval for the proposed work to take place – which is something that several were unable to secure, even for sites that would otherwise have been strong candidates for restoration. For more material on partnerships' engagement with land managers, see our findings on EQ3 and EQ4.

Summary

Key insights from our findings on Evaluation Question 1 are outlined in Table 8.

Table 8 Summary of Evaluation Question 1 findings

What has worked well	What could be improved
Application guidance documents have been mostly well received.	Application guidance could be adjusted to include more detail on common areas of confusion.
Application process has been made clearer and more streamlined from Round 1 to Round 2.	Application process could be streamlined further.
Pre-engagement activities including webinars have been useful.	It could be helpful to ask applicants to provide a brief executive summary, and/or explicitly discourage overlap between answers to different questions.
Clarification question process has proven valuable.	Claims and payments process could be improved to minimise future payment delays.

EQ2: Have Discovery Grants been successful in developing Restoration Grant applications?

EQ2 – Key Takeaways

Discovery Grants have been a successful precursor to Restoration Grants. Several Discovery grantees have already successfully secured Restoration Grants for the same sites. Many others plan to apply for Restoration funding in Round 3 and are in a good position to do so.

This section of the report examines the second evaluation question and its associated sub-questions: namely, the extent to which Discovery Grant recipients have been successful in developing Restoration Grant applications. EQ2 only has one associated sub-question, which is listed in Table 9.

Table 9 The sub-questions of Evaluation Question 2

Evaluation sub-question	Report subsection and page number* (cross-referenced) *These page numbers link to the first page of relevant subsection(s)
To what extent do organisations submitting restoration grant applications benefit from previously having a discovery grant?	pg. 35; pg. 39; pg. 39

Our key findings on EQ2 are:

- So far, three Discovery Round 1 recipients have gone on to receive Restoration Round 2 funding;

Although progression of three out of 15 Discovery Grants might seem like a small proportion, it is important to note that many recipients of Discovery Round 1 and Round 2 funding will be applying for Restoration Round 3 and other future restoration rounds.

It is also important to note the positive feedback provided by partnerships who have progressed from Discovery to Restoration funding. The Peak District National Park Authority, for example, emphasised the value of its prior Discovery Grant to its proposed Restoration activities, as shown in the following quote from its Restoration Round 2 application:

> "The NCPGS Moor for Climate Discovery project [their Discovery Round 1 Grant] has brought forward these proposals for the restoration, monitoring and engagement actions. The Discovery project has developed plans and removed barriers, including securing the support of key match-funding partners."

- Discovery Grants allow grantees to gather the information they need to prepare themselves for the Restoration Grant application process; and
- It will be important for NE to continue to facilitate a seamless transition between the timelines of Discovery and Restoration Grants.

So far, three Discovery Round 1 recipients have gone on to receive Restoration Round 2 funding

So far, three Discovery Round 1 recipients have gone on to receive Restoration Round 2 funding to restore the same areas of peatland that were covered by their Discovery funding. Those recipients are the Peak District National Park Authority, the Somerset Peatland Partnership, and the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust (Humberhead Levels Project).

The progression from Discovery to Restoration funding for these three successful examples are summarised in Figure 3, Figure 4, and Figure 5.

Discovery Round 1

Partners

Peak District National Park Authority (*lead applicant*)

Yorkshire Water Services

Severn Trent Water

United Utilities

National Trust

Woodland Trust

Staffordshire Wildlife Trust

Ministry of Defence

Sites

63 sites across the Dark Peak, Southern Pennines, West Pennines and South West Peak Staffordshire Moorlands, covering 34,614 ha of upland catchment habitat.

Aims

Address site-specific knowledge/data gaps.

Develop detailed restoration proposals.

Investigate and secure match funding.

Establish a monitoring baseline in readiness to evidence the impacts of restoration.

Assess requirements for and secure all relevant permissions and consents.

Tender for all capital requirements to be progressed prior to Restoration Grant application stages.

Restoration Round 2

Partners

Peak District National Park Authority *(lead applicant)*

Moors for the Future Partnership

Sites

1 site within the Peak District National Park:

- Snailsden (820 ha)

Aims

Protect and conserve 1,777 ha of active blanket bog by carrying out restoration works across 433.2 hectares of badly degraded bog in the South Pennine Moors Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and the Peak District Moors 'Special Protection Area' (SPA).

Figure 3 Progression from Discovery Round 1 to Restoration Round 2 for Peak District National Park Authority.

Discovery Round 1

Partners

Somerset Wildlife Trust *(lead applicant)*

Avon Wildlife Trust

RSPB

Natural England

Hawk & Owl Trust

Sites

14 sites across Somerset.

Aims

Place 1000 ha of degraded peatland on a trajectory to recovery by 2025.

Fully establish the Somerset Peatland Partnership for Somerset and North Somerset.

Gather information required to submit two Restoration Grant applications: one in 2022 and one in 2023.

Restoration Round 2

Partners

Somerset Wildlife Trust *(lead applicant)*

Natural England

Sites

2 sites:

- Shapwick Heath (41 ha)
- Westhay Moor (26 ha)

Aims

Get 67 ha of grass-dominated, drained, lowland modified bog on a trajectory to restoration by 2025.

Figure 4 Progression from Discovery Round 1 to Restoration Round 2 for Somerset Peatland Partnership.

Discovery Round 1

Partners

Yorkshire Wildlife Trust *(lead applicant)*

Nottingham Wildlife Trust

Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust

Natural England

North Lincolnshire Council

Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council

Environment Agency

RSPB

Doncaster East Internal Drainage Board

Isle of Axholme and North Nottinghamshire Water Level Management Board

Sites

11 sites covering ~4380 ha.

Aims

Draw up costed restoration plans for peatland protected sites within the Humberhead Levels.

Gain a full understanding of the extent, depth, and condition of farmed peats that buffer and link the protected sites within the project area.

Increase the capacity of partners and other land managers to resource peatland restoration and maintain restored sites.

Increase support for peatland restoration amongst those involved in managing farmed peats, and visitors to peatland nature reserves.

Restoration Round 2

Partners

Yorkshire Wildlife Trust *(lead applicant)*

Natural England

Sites

Target area for restoration is 2,869 ha - specific sites dependent on outcomes of Discovery Grant work.

Aims

Restore 2,869 ha of peatland habitat by managing water levels to achieve a greater area of peatland vegetation.

Create habitats on at least 300 ha of farmed peatland areas that lie adjacent to and buffer protected sites.

Reduce carbon emissions over 2,869 ha of peatlands and enhance carbon sequestration where possible.

Increase knowledge and understanding of the value of peatlands, their benefits for wildlife, their historic heritage, and their role in mitigating the impacts of climate change.

Figure 5 Progression from Discovery Round 1 to Restoration Round 2 for Yorkshire Wildlife Trust (Humberhead Levels Project).

Although progression of three out of 15 Discovery Grants might seem like a small proportion, it is important to note that many recipients of Discovery Round 1 and Round 2 funding will be applying for Restoration Round 3 and other future restoration rounds.

It is also important to note the positive feedback provided by partnerships who have progressed from Discovery to Restoration funding. The Peak District National Park Authority, for example, emphasised the value of its prior Discovery Grant to its proposed Restoration activities, as shown in the following quote from its Restoration Round 2 application:

> "The NCPGS Moor for Climate Discovery project [their Discovery Round 1 Grant] has brought forward these proposals for the restoration, monitoring and engagement actions. The Discovery project has developed plans and removed barriers, including securing the support of key match-funding partners."

Discovery Grants allow grantees to gather the information they need to prepare themselves for the Restoration Grant application process

Discovery Grants have allowed grantees to undertake, and/or accelerate, a wide range of activities that would not have taken place on the same timescale without NCPGS support. Those activities include, but are not limited to: collecting baseline data, identifying the sites most suited to restoration, securing funding partners, and mitigating conflicts between peatland restoration and other priorities (e.g. protection of wildlife and breeding birds).

Most partnerships agreed that the work undertaken during their Discovery Grant had substantially prepared them to apply for a Restoration Grant in three key ways. First, work undertaken during the Discovery Grant – including surveying, ground truthing, and baseline monitoring – allowed partnerships to acquire the data they would need to prepare a subsequent Restoration Grant application. Secondly, several partnerships noted that the availability of the Discovery Grant served as a catalyst for partnerships to come together and undertake longstanding work that no prior grant mechanism had enabled them to pursue. One partnership noted that the Discovery Grant scheme had been instrumental in bringing their peat partnership into existence. Third, and finally, most partnerships noted that by going through the process of the Discovery Grants, they became more familiar and comfortable with the processes and administrative side of the NCPGS.

It will be important for NE to continue to facilitate a seamless transition between the timelines of Discovery and Restoration Grants

One key challenge faced by Discovery grantees looking to progress to Restoration funding has been the gap between the end date of Discovery Grants and the start date of Restoration Grants. Projects have faced the possibility of losing staff or if they are unable to cover the costs of the unfunded gap between grant periods.

Natural England have responded to this issue and have put in place a process to extend Discovery Grants, on the condition that additional Discovery work will be undertaken in the

period that would be otherwise unfunded. Overall, the introduction of this extension has been welcomed by grantees, although a small number of partnerships have expressed frustration around the administrative requirements involved in securing an extension.

For the remaining delivery of the NCPGS, NE should ensure that the timelines for Discovery and Restoration grants are lined up from the start, so that grantees can more easily transition between the two and reduce the overall administrative burden for projects in the late stages of their Discovery Grants.

Summary

Key insights from our findings on Evaluation Question 2 are outlined in Table 10.

Table 10 Summary of Evaluation Question 2 findings.

What has worked well	What could be improved
Discovery grants are funding preparatory work that partnerships would not otherwise have the resources to carry out.	For Round 3, NE has bridged the gap between Discovery and Restoration funding timelines. NE should continue to bridge that gap for any future schemes. This will ensure continuity of work and avoid unnecessary setbacks (e.g. loss of staff).

EQ3: To what extent have projects achieved their objectives and delivered as intended?

EQ3 – Key Takeaways

Most NCPGS projects are achieving their objectives and delivering as intended. Some, however, have had to adjust their approach and/or timelines due to unexpected barriers.

This section of the report examines the third evaluation question. It assesses whether the NCPGS projects funded so far are on track to achieve their objectives and deliver as intended. The sub-questions associated with Evaluation Question 3 are outlined in Table 21.

Table 21 The sub-questions of Evaluation Question 3

Evaluation sub-question	Report subsection and page number* (cross-referenced) *These page numbers link to the first page of relevant subsection(s)
Have project objectives changed during the course of the grant scheme and why?	pg. 41
Did projects deliver at their intended timescales?	pg. 41
Have restoration activities been delivered as intended?	pg. 41; pg. 41
Have external factors impacted the delivery of restoration activities?	pg. 41; pg. 41

Our key findings for EQ3 are:

- Some projects have had to delay milestones; and
- Several projects have made changes to their sites under investigation.

Some projects have had to delay milestones

As previously discussed, legacy issues from Round 1 of the NCPGS have had a knock-on effect for certain projects. Several Discovery Round 1 and Restoration Round 2 projects have had to delay their milestones for several months as a result.

For the most part, these delays can be traced back to a lack of responsiveness from the NE peat team. Delay in awarding Round 1 Grants pushed certain project timelines back and cut into the first window of delivery. Grantees had to adjust their recruitment windows accordingly. As already noted, NE have improved on this for Round 2 and are aiming to award Round 3 grants in August 2023 – a significant improvement on Round 1.

For some projects, certain aspects of work – including peat depth investigations – were delayed while grantees waited for responses from the NE peat team. Multiple partnerships have emphasised that the team's responsiveness on such issues has somewhat improved between Rounds 1 and 2. There is hope among grantees that improvements will continue to be made during Round 3.

Several projects have made changes to their sites under investigation

Several Discovery Round 1 and Restoration Round 1 projects have changed their target sites. These changes represent the only significant sense in which restoration activities have not been delivered as intended.

Reasons for changing target sites have included:

- Proposed sites not in fact being suitable for restoration;

- Prioritisation of a subset of sites;
- Lack of time to investigate all proposed sites;
- Other sites having potential for restoration that was previously unknown; and
- Land managers withdrawing or withholding permission to carry out planned work at proposed sites.

In some cases, grantees were able to replace their original proposed sites with new sites that covered just as much area. In other cases, grantees acknowledged that they would no longer be able to cover their original target hectarage due to changes to their project sites.

Summary

Key insights from our findings on Evaluation Question 3 are outlined in Table 32.

Table 32 Summary of Evaluation Question 3 findings

What has worked well	What could be improved
Projects have mostly been delivering as intended.	Applicants would be able to plan project delivery more effectively if NE consistently delivered to their advertised timelines.
NE has been supportive in accepting adjustments to planned work where necessary.	Relatedly, some changes to planned works can be traced back to unexpected delays in the application process (e.g. delayed contract delivery by NE).

EQ4 – Key Takeaways

The grant scheme has been highly successful at supporting partnership working. Discovery Grants in particular have supported the formation of new partnerships. NCPGS grants have often been the catalyst for collaboration that partners had been hoping to build for a long time but would not otherwise have had the resource to establish.

EQ4: To what extent has the grant scheme been delivered through partnership working?

This section of the report examines Evaluation Question 4. It assesses the extent to which the NCPGS has been delivered through partnership working, guided by the evaluation sub-questions listed in Table 43.

Table 43 The sub-questions of Evaluation Question 4

Evaluation sub-question	Report subsection and page number* (cross-referenced) *These page numbers link to the first page of relevant subsection(s)
To what extent has the NCPGS facilitated partnership working on peatland restoration and newer peat partnerships to bid for restoration funding?	pg. 43
To what extent have partnerships engaged/sought advice (and from whom)?	pg. 44; pg. 44
Is there sufficient guidance for new peat partnerships to deliver restoration?	pg. 44; pg. 44
What extent of restoration activities were undertaken prior to NCPGS (e.g. agri-environment schemes, Heritage Lottery Funding, EU LIFE funding?)	pg. 43

Our key findings on EQ4 are:

- The NCPGS has been highly successful at supporting partnership working;
- Applicants have engaged with NE representatives and with each other to share knowledge and seek advice; and
- Grantees' engagement with land managers has presented challenges.

The NCPGS has been highly successful at supporting partnership working

26 NCPGS grants have been awarded so far to 18 different lead organisations. Many of these lead organisations have partner organisations, some of which are themselves partnerships. The networks supported by NCPGS cover wide areas and represent exactly the kind of partnership that is needed in order to support peatland restoration at a landscape scale.

The extent to which successful NCPGS applicants had previously been involved in restoration work funded through other sources (e.g. EU LIFE funding) varied across partnerships. Some NCPGS grant recipients were much more well-established and experienced than others. Discovery Grants have played a significant role in supporting new or recently formed partnerships. For example, 5 new partnerships were supported through Discovery Round 1:

- Broads Peatland Partnership;
- Dorset Peat Partnership;
- Fens East Peat Partnership;
- A new partnership proposed by North York Moors NPA; and
- Somerset Peatland Partnership.

In the words of one of the NCPGS grantees:

"The scheme has been a catalyst for a new peat partnership to come into existence and to put forward plans to restore a large amount of peatland."

Applicants have engaged with NE representatives and with each other to share knowledge and seek advice

Spotlight 4

Community and network building

An example of what could be improved in future

Many applicants mentioned the value of speaking with each other, at all stages of the NCPGS application process, to share their experiences and expertise. Several raised the idea of Natural England providing a central forum to facilitate this kind of knowledge sharing.

The forum could come in the form of an online learning hub that all NCPGS applicants and/or grantees would be able to access. NE representatives could check in on the forum periodically to answer questions or mediate discussion.

By providing a central space for knowledge sharing, NE would be increasing the **accessibility** of the scheme. As it is, bigger and more well-established partnerships stand at an advantage with respect to knowledge sharing. They have been able to rely on their existing networks to gather expertise from other partnerships. Smaller and newly formed partnerships have been operating in siloes by comparison.

As mentioned previously, NCPGS grantees have viewed local NE teams as an especially helpful source of guidance on both the application process and project delivery.

Grantees have also mentioned the value of engaging with each other to share knowledge. One grantee, for example, emphasised the importance of partnerships sharing knowledge to coordinate access to a diverse range of funding opportunities.

Grantees supported the idea of Natural England providing an official forum (e.g. an online portal) for NCPGS applicants. This would allow conversations to happen in a more open and structured way – and it would make sure that all applicants, not only bigger partnerships with pre-existing networks and relationships, could benefit from speaking with each other. The opportunity to build a forum for community and network building is highlighted in Spotlight 4.

Grantees' engagement with land managers has presented challenges

Engagement with land managers has presented the biggest challenge so far to effective NCPGS partnership working. Lack of landowner permissions was a common concern in evaluator feedback for Restoration Grant applications in Rounds 1 and 2.

It seems that their concern was warranted: as discussed earlier, several NCPGS target sites have had to be changed due to land managers withdrawing or withholding permission for the proposed works to take place.

A key barrier to engaging with land managers is the lack of a clear economic model for moving away from alternative land uses – including intensive, drainage-based agriculture for lowland peat. Possible solutions to this include:

- Clearer guidance on the best practices and economic benefits of paludiculture (for lowland peat); and

- Clearer guidance on long-term private finance solutions, including the Peatland Code (for lowland and upland peat).

Spotlight 5 suggests an action that Natural England could take to help facilitate grantees' engagement with land managers.

Spotlight 5

Support for grantees' engagement with land managers

An example of what could be improved in future

In future, NE could put together an official guidance document for land managers which outlines:

- The long-term economic benefits of restoring their land through the NCPGS;

- Details on the relationship between the NCPGS and other future funding schemes; and

- The benefits of introducing new 'wet agriculture' techniques on previously drained land.

It would be important for this guidance document to be **targeted at land managers**, rather than NCPGS applicants, as its intended audience.

As it is, land managers struggle to see peatland restoration as an income stream that will be **secure in the long term**. They have legitimate concerns about whether peatland restoration will provide **a good return on investment**, especially in lowland areas where they have to consider the opportunity cost of forgoing drainage-based agriculture.

Many applicants have had to compile their own communications materials to advise land managers on the benefits of the NCPGS. This has taken a significant amount of time and resource from applicants who are often already overstretched. Applicants have also emphasised that **guidance coming directly from NE would carry more authority**.

Summary

Key insights from our findings on Evaluation Question 4 are outlined in Table 54.

Table 54 Summary of Evaluation Question 4 findings

What has worked well	What could be improved
Discovery Grants have supported new and recently formed partnerships.	NE could provide more support for grantees' engagement with land managers.

What has worked well	What could be improved
All NCPGS grants have supported some degree of partnership working.	Grantees could benefit from more direct, timely and responsive engagement with the NE peat team.
Grantees have engaged effectively with local NE teams and with each other.	Applicants and grantees could engage more effectively with each other if NE provided a forum designed to facilitate knowledge sharing.

EQ5: To what extent has the grant scheme supported employment and skills development?

EQ5 – Key Takeaways

The NCPGS has supported a variety of green jobs, both directly and indirectly. The scheme has also supported training on skills relevant to peatland restoration. Comprehensive data on employment and skills is only available for Round 1 so far; that is the data on which the conclusions of this section are based.

This section of the report addresses Evaluation Question 5: "to what extent has the grant scheme supported employment and skills development?" Table 65 outlines the sub-questions associated with this question and shows where each sub-question will be addressed.

Table 65 The sub-questions of Evaluation Question 5

Evaluation sub-question	Report subsection and page number* (cross-referenced) *These page numbers link to the first page of relevant subsection(s)
To what extent has the NCPGS supported `green jobs'?	pg. 48; pg. 49; pg. 50; pg. 51
How have the projects supported the development of skills relevant to the peatland restoration sector?	pg. 51
To what extent has the supplier and contractor base for peatland restoration been increased?	pg. 51

Our key findings on EQ5 are:

- Round 1 grants have directly supported fixed term job creation and retention;
- Round 1 grants have directly supported permanent job retention but not permanent job creation;
- Round 1 grants have directly supported far more fixed term than permanent positions;

- The long-term impact of the NCPGS on job creation/retention is therefore unclear; and
- Round 1 grants have indirectly supported jobs, apprenticeships, and volunteer training.

Round 1 grants have directly supported fixed term job creation and retention

As shown in

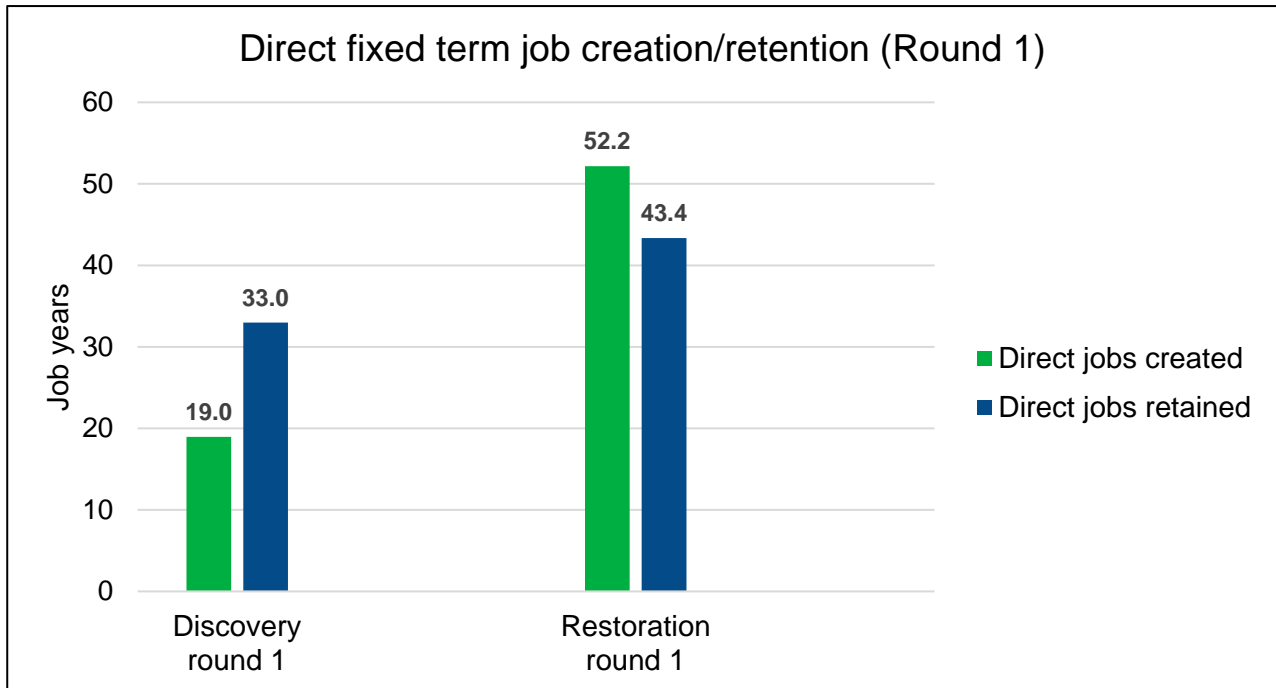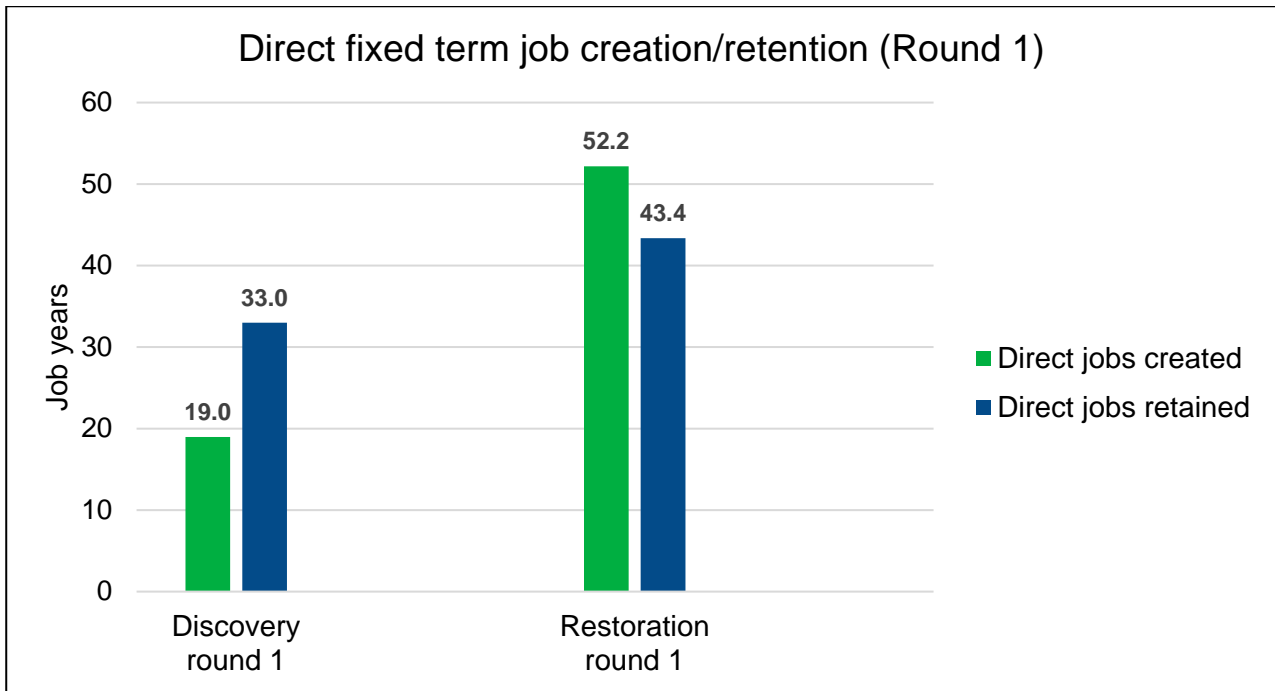Direct fixed term job creation/retention (Round 1)

Figure 6, Discovery Round 1 directly funded 19 job years of work for new recruits and 33 job years of work for existing staff. Restoration Round 1 directly funded 52.2 job years of work for new recruits and 43.4 job years of work for existing staff.
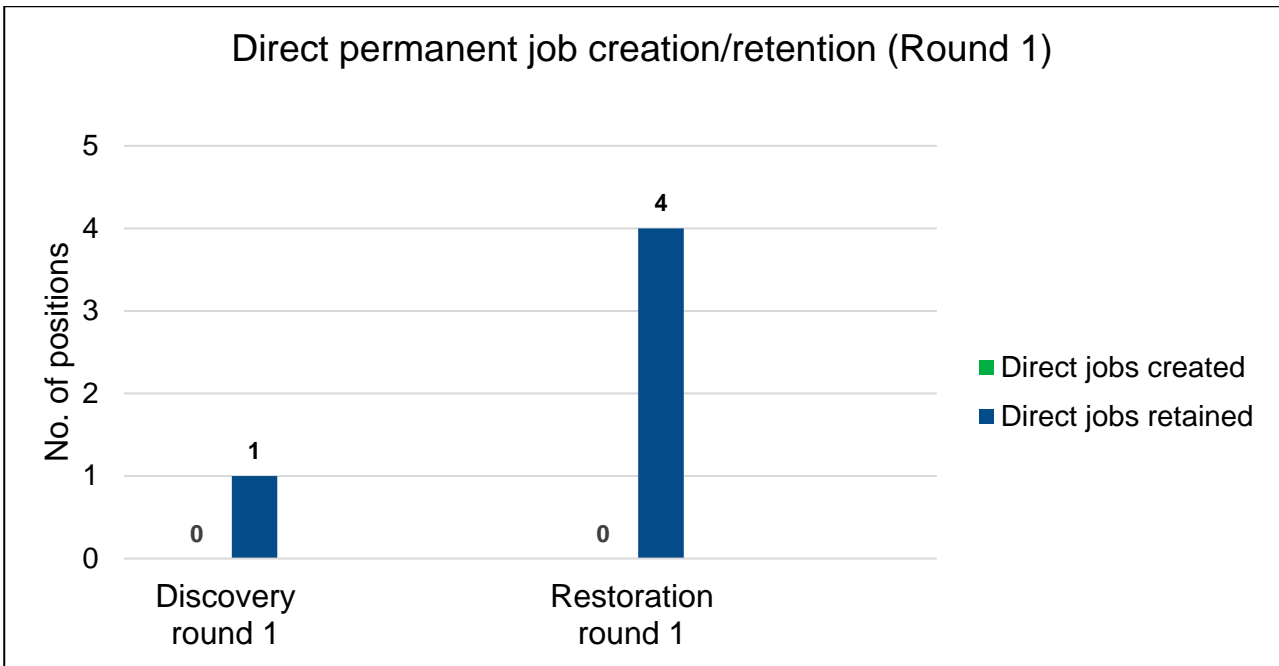
Figure 6 Direct fixed term job creation/retention (Round 1).

Round 1 grants have directly supported permanent job retention but not permanent job creation

As shown in Figure 7, Discovery Round 1 did not directly create any permanent jobs, but it did directly lead to the retention of one permanent post. Restoration Round 1 did not directly create any permanent jobs either. But it did directly lead to the retention of four permanent positions.

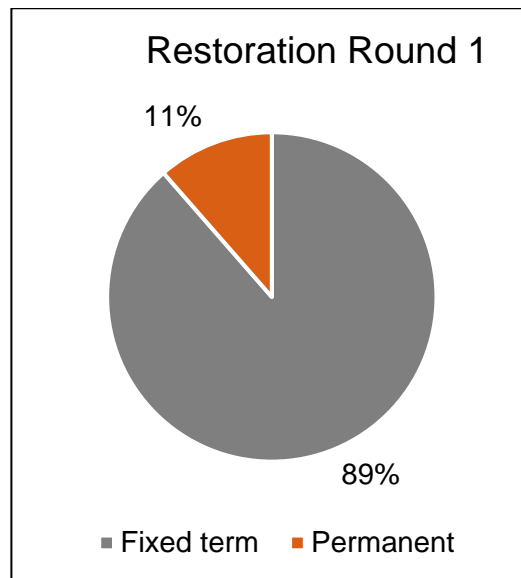**Figure 7 Direct permanent job creation/retention (Round 1)**

Round 1 grants have directly supported far more fixed term than permanent positions

Based on Round 1 data, it seems that NCPGS grants directly support far more fixed term than permanent positions, as shown in Figure 8 and Figure 9.
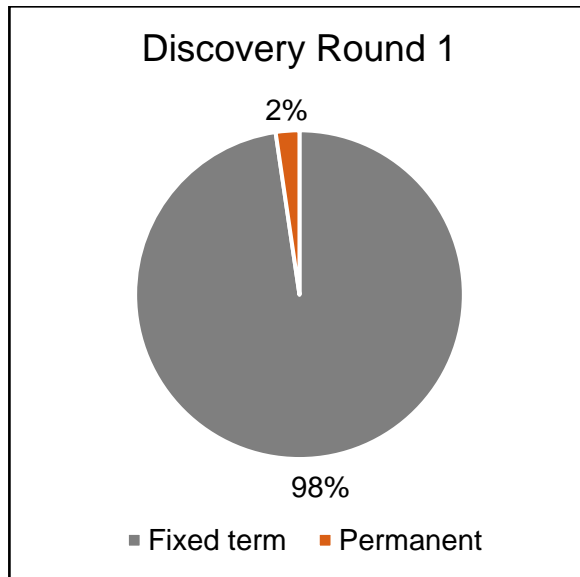
Figure 8 Percentage of fixed term vs. permanent jobs created and retained by Discovery Round 1.

Figure 9 Percentage of fixed term vs. permanent jobs created and retained by Restoration Round 1.

The long-term impact of the NCPGS on job creation/retention is therefore unclear

Most of the direct jobs created/retained due to NCPGS grants so far correspond to contract lengths between 3 months and 43 months. It is unclear what will happen to these jobs once the NCPGS grant window closes.

The long-term impact of the NCPGS on job creation/retention is therefore unclear, especially given ongoing uncertainty about how peatland restoration will be funded once the NCPGS ends in 2025. Particular uncertainty remains about the future of agri-environment schemes, and how and whether private finance will be able to support restoration in the long term.

This could pose a problem if a lack of secure employment becomes a barrier to recruiting and retaining people for the ongoing peatland restoration effort: there is a risk that skilled and experienced people will be lost from the sector.

Round 1 grants have indirectly supported jobs, apprenticeships, and volunteer training

In addition to direct job creation and retention, Round 1 grants have indirectly supported jobs, apprenticeships, and volunteer training.

Discovery Round 1 grants indirectly supported two Project Officer jobs and the training of 25 farmers/landowners on peat identification.

Restoration Round 1 grants indirectly supported the creation of three jobs, including contractors and digger drivers. Restoration Round 1 grants indirectly supported the retention of ten jobs, including contractors, digger drivers, practical work staff, foresters,

and an ecologist. They supported one apprenticeship and the training of 17 volunteers: two on monitoring and 15 on practical work.

Summary

Key insights from our findings on Evaluation Question 5 are outlined in Table 76.

Table 76 Summary of Evaluation Question 5 findings

What has worked well	What could be improved
Grants have supported job creation and retention, both directly and indirectly.	More work could be done to assess how these jobs and skills will be safeguarded for the future.
Grants have also supported the development of skills relevant to peatland restoration, including through the training of volunteers.	[blank cell]

Conclusion and policy-relevant lessons

Overall, the first two years of the NCPGS have successfully delivered funding to multiple partnerships across a range of peatland areas. The grant scheme has been broadly effective at supporting partnerships to undertake landscape-scale restoration of peatland in England and has provided a clear opportunity for emerging partnerships to undertake discovery work that they had previously not been able to secure funding for.

As this process evaluation has highlighted, whilst the scheme has been delivered in a way that lines up with its objectives, it has not always been delivered via processes that are convenient or easy for applicants to navigate. Challenges have included, for example, 'clunky' application templates, overly broad application questions, a lack of guidance and associated documentation on certain NCPGS requirements, other guidance documents being excessively long, a lack of responsiveness from the NE peat team, and delays in the awarding of grants. Furthermore, certain elements of the scheme – notably the payment and claims process – have presented projects with significant cashflow challenges that risk damaging the reputation of the scheme.

The NE peat team has altered processes, produced new documentation, and amended existing documents to respond to issues raised by grantees. Overall, the NE peat team has demonstrated a clear ability to listen and react to the feedback they have received. Grantees, although frustrated, generally recognise that the issues they have faced are a result of the complexity of the task that the NCPGS aims to achieve. Significant levels of goodwill towards the scheme remain; grantees have praised the NE peat team's efforts, and they recognise that the scheme's processes are continually improving.

The scheme has provided a unique and much-needed pipeline for exploratory work (funded through Discovery Grants) to feed into restoration work (funded by Restoration Grants). The scheme has facilitated partnership working, enabled discovery and monitoring activities to take place, and catalysed partnerships to undertake peatland restoration work.

The peatland restoration community is diverse, including stakeholders with a variety of backgrounds and levels of experience. There is a need to build on this to establish more formal networks and communities of practice. Such networks would help partnerships to share knowledge and examples of best practice. They would formalise relationships between grantees in different regions, creating opportunities for future collaboration. Additionally, by sharing clear cases of successful peatland restoration through such networks, NE and existing partnerships would be able to provide new and emerging partnerships with wider support and guidance on beginning their journey in peatland restoration.

In addition to these positive points, our evaluation has highlighted some important challenges for future policy on peatland restoration, which are of relevance to the Peatland Restoration Roadmap and to future grant programmes.

On **developing a long-term policy framework to support peatland restoration** – the NCPGS has provided much needed funding for peatland restoration in the 2021-25 period, helping to deliver progress towards the short-term targets in the Peat Action Plan. It has faced constraints relating to the time-limited nature of the grants available, and uncertainties regarding future support for peatland restoration and other environmental land management activities. Building on the experience of the NCPGS grantees, there is a need to develop longer term support schemes under Environmental Land Management schemes which provide greater certainty about future support towards peatland restoration targets. This will be essential for building confidence among land managers and delivery partnerships, and for supporting longer term jobs and skills development.

On **supporting peatland restoration skills and careers** – skills shortages, and difficulties in recruitment, were identified through stakeholder interviews and by participants in the online workshop as barriers to meeting peatland restoration ambitions. As well as providing greater certainty regarding future funding, there would also be merit in supporting the sector to develop skills and more secure career paths, thus helping to establish the workforce needed to deliver long term restoration targets.

On **continuing to support Discovery Grants as well as Restoration Grants** – the NCPGS has demonstrated the importance of Discovery Grants in designing, defining and de-risking peatland restoration efforts. Discovery Grants, or other future grants with a similar scope, could continue to play an impactful role in future support for peatland restoration.

On **demonstrating viable models for long term management of peatlands** – the profitability of current land use and management practices, alongside evidence gaps on financially viable alternative practices, pose a significant barrier to restoration. This is of particular concern for lowland peatland. There is a need for further research and demonstration into peatland management practices (e.g. paludiculture), as part of or in addition to an enhanced Discovery Grant programme.

On **developing private finance for peatland restoration** – while the NCPGS has sought to encourage uptake of private finance mechanisms for peatland restoration, it has made less progress than anticipated in achieving this in practice. Peatland restoration should, however, be capable of attracting private finance given its benefits for carbon storage and sequestration, water quality and flood management. A recent report for Natural England on peatland carbon finance recognised that the peatland carbon market is at an earlier stage of development than the corresponding market for woodland carbon, and identified a range of issues that need to be addressed to ensure its development (Tribe et al, 2022). Future support for peatland restoration needs to redouble efforts to develop and demonstrate blended finance models, in which public support for public benefits (e.g. biodiversity) is accompanied by increasing private finance for nature-based solutions (including through the Peatland Code).

References

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UK Government. 2021. England Peat Action Plan. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/england-peat-action-plan (Accessed 10.03.2023).

Glossary

EA – Environment Agency

ELMS – Environmental Land Management Schemes

EPAP – England Peat Action Plan

DEFRA – Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

NCF – Nature for Climate Fund

NCPGS – Nature for Climate Peatland Grant Scheme

NE – Natural England

Annex 1

Table 87 Grants distributed through the NCPGS so far, including project partnership organisations

Grant	Grant project title (if applicable)	Lead organisation	Project partnership organisations
Restoration Round 1	Border Mires	Forestry England	Forestry England
			Northumberland Wildlife Trust
			Northumberland National Park Authority
			Natural England
			Newcastle University
			Ministry of Defence
	Project 28469 Northern Lowland Peatland Coalition	Lancashire Wildlife Trust	Lancashire Wildlife Trust
			Cumbria Wildlife Trust
	Nature for Climate Peatland Scheme – Project 28469	RSPB	RSPB
			United Utilities
	South West Peatland Partnership	South West Water	South West Water
	Great North Bog (Yorkshire & North Pennines)	Yorkshire Wildlife Trust	Yorkshire Wildlife Trust
			North Pennines AONB Partnership
			Manchester University
Restoration Round 2	Great North Bog (W) Peatland Restoration	National Trust	National Trust
			Cumbria Wildlife Trust
			Forest of Bowland AONB
	Moor Climate Action	Peak District NPA	Peak District NPA / Moors for the Future Partnership
	Ridge Graham	Ridge Carbon Capture	Ridge Carbon Capture
	SPP 2022 Peatland Restoration Project	Somerset Wildlife Trust	Somerset Wildlife Trust
			Natural England
	Humberhead Levels Peatland Restoration Project	Yorkshire Wildlife Trust	Yorkshire Wildlife Trust
			Natural England
	Great North Bog (Yorkshire & North Pennines) Phase 2	Yorkshire Wildlife Trust (Yorkshire Peat Partnership)	Yorkshire Peat Partnership
			North Pennines AONB Partnership
			National Trust
Discovery Round 1	Broads Peatland Partnership	Broads Authority	Broads Authority
			Norfolk Wildlife Trust
			Palladium Group
			RSPB
			Suffolk Wildlife trust
			Norfolk FWAG

Grant	Grant project title (if applicable)	Lead organisation	Project partnership organisations
			National Trust
	Fens East Peat Partnership	Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust	Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust
			Norfolk Wildlife Trust
			NE
			RSPB
			Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire
			National Trust
	Great North Bog (West)	National Trust	National Trust
			Cumbria Wildlife Trust
			Lancashire Wildlife Trust
			Forest of Bowland AONB
	Cambridgeshire Fens	NIAB	NIAB
			Cambridge County Council
			Landowners (peat farmers)
			Internal Drainage Boards
	Moor to Restore Partnership	North York Moors National Park Authority	North York Moors National Park Authority
			Palladium Group
			Natural England
			Yorkshire Peat Partnership
			Forestry England
			Hawnby Estate
			Moorland Association
			Egton Estate
	Moors for Climate	Peak District National Park Authority	Peak District National Park Authority
			Yorkshire Water Services
			Severn Trent Water
			United Utilities
			National Trust
			Woodland Trust
			Staffordshire Wildlife Trust
			Ministry of Defence
	Somerset Peatland Partnership	Somerset Wildlife Trust	Somerset Wildlife Trust
			Avon Wildlife Trust
			RSPB
			Natural England
			Hawk & Owl Trust

Grant	Grant project title (if applicable)	Lead organisation	Project partnership organisations
	Great Northern Fen (Humberhead Levels Partnership)	Yorkshire Wildlife Trust	Yorkshire Wildlife Trust
			Nottingham Wildlife Trust
			Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust
			Natural England
			North Lincolnshire Council
			Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council
			Environment Agency
			RSPB
			Doncaster East Internal Drainage Board
			Isle of Axholme and North Nottinghamshire Water Level Management Board
	Dorset Catchment Partnerships	Dorset Wildlife Trust on behalf of Dorset Catchment Partnership	Dorset Wildlife Trust
			Dorset Catchment Partnership
			Natural England
			Forestry England
			RSPB
	Northumberland Peat Partnership	Northumberland Wildlife Trust	Northumberland Wildlife Trust
			National Trust
			Northumberland National Park Authority
Discovery Round 2	N/A	Derbyshire Wildlife Trust	Derbyshire Wildlife Trust
	Northern Lowland Peatland Coalition	Lancashire Wildlife Trust	Lancashire Wildlife Trust
			Greater Manchester Wetlands Partnership
			Cumbria Wildlife Trust
			Cumbria Peat Partnership
	N/A	National Trust	National Trust
			Moors for the Future Partnership
	NED: North of England Discovery	North Pennines AONB	North Pennines AONB Partnership
			Yorkshire Peat Partnership
	Wimbledon and Putney Commons Peatland Discovery Project	Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators	Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators

Annex 2 – Interview Guides

Interview Protocol for semi-structured interviews with applicants to support the process evaluation of the Nature for Climate Peatland Grant Scheme

Overview and objectives of the interview

The overarching purpose of our interview is to gather evidence to support us in our process evaluation of the Nature for Climate Peatland Grant Scheme. We are wanting to better understand whether the grant scheme is being delivered as intended and to identify the aspects that are working/not working, for whom and why. Our evaluation will provide Natural England with robust evidence to help them refine and adapt their grant scheme and to help identify barriers and opportunities for future restoration.

The interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will be conducted over Microsoft Teams or over the phone.

Your responses will be anonymised for the purposes of our evaluation and no identifiable information will be provided to Natural England.

General Interview structure

- Introductions between interviewer and interviewee
- Introduction of the objectives of the interview
- Explanation of data privacy, consent, participant anonymity and treatment of responses
- Ask the interviewee if they have any questions at this stage about the process
- Interview questions
- Following the questions, provide a final opportunity for the interviewee to provide any further thoughts that may have arisen during the interview or to ask any final questions
- Close the interview

Purpose of the interviews

To understand the experiences of applicants and grantees with the NCPGS, and to explore the relationship between Discovery and Restoration Grants.

Interview Questions

1. Thinking back to when you first became aware of the scheme, where/how did you hear about the scheme?
   a. What materials/activities did you engage with to learn more about the scheme (for example did you attend any webinars, or access any

guidance documents?), if so, did you find these activities useful?

2. What motivated you to apply for the scheme?
    a. If the scheme was not available, what alternatives would you have pursued if any?

3. Thinking back to when you applied for the scheme, what were your experiences with the application process?

4. Do you recall whether there were any issues or challenges when applying? Or if there were any areas you requested further support/guidance?
    a. Were there any obstacles in engaging landowners with the application/delivery process?

5. Focussing on feedback/support:
    a. Thinking about the feedback provided on the application, who provided you with this feedback and did you find this useful and clear? Has it helped you with future applications?
    b. Thinking about the post-award support provided, who has been providing this and how useful and accessible has this been?

6. Have you applied for, or been involved in any other peat restoration grant schemes? If so, how would you compare those schemes with the NCPGS in terms of the application/feedback processes, and the requirements of the scheme?

7. (For applicants that have been awarded a grant) Thinking about the application and delivery of the projects in considering the Historic Environment, protected sites, and project monitoring, how well did the Partnership understand these requirements and what is your experience of meeting these during project delivery?
    a. As part of the project delivery has the partnership had to apply for permissions/consent? If yes, were there any issues/obstacles with this? If yes, what was the nature of these obstacles?
    b. Is there any further information or training that might be useful in increasing your understanding of what permissions are required for these schemes?

8. (For applicants that have had a previous Discovery Grant) In your experience, did previously being award a Discovery Grant better prepare you for applying for a Restoration Grant? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?

9. (For applicants with a Restoration Grant) How did you go about establishing the pipeline of sites for restoration? What sources of support/funding helped you achieve this?
    a. Were all possible restoration sites included in the grant, or were some left out? If some were left out, why?

10. In terms of the funding requirements for the scheme, how did you go about securing the additional funding required? Were there any barriers in obtaining this funding?
    a. Thinking about securing future funding, what barriers do you see here?
    b. Are any of the sources of additional funding you have secured 'repeatable'?

11. Thinking about your partnership, did the partnership exist prior to application for the NCPGS, or did you establish this partnership to apply for the scheme?
    a. If so, could you talk more about that process? Did guidance documents provided for the NCPGS assist in the process?

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