NATURAL ENGLAND

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A LEARNING PROGRAMME

How embedding evaluation has added value to Access to Nature

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

Welcome to this paper, one of four in the third series of Learning Papers. **Here we focus on the evaluation process that is at the heart of Access to Nature. The paper is based on the findings from Natural England and the projects about how they have implemented the evaluation process and how this has added value to both individual projects and the programme as a whole. This is coupled with the experience of the programme's independent evaluators, Icarus, who have managed the evaluation process and have acted as critical friend to Natural England throughout.**

The third series of papers uses information drawn from well established projects and follows on from Access to Nature's early findings papers. These papers are being produced across the lifetime of Access to Nature and demonstrate what is being learnt about encouraging people who have little or no experience of the natural environment to go out into the outdoors. They also provide insights into the running of a programme such as this. This includes messages which seek to inform the continuing work of Access to Nature projects and the work of other organisations interested in or committed to this kind of work. More Learning Papers will be produced in the final phase of Access to Nature and as we build on our learning to date.

THE CURRENT CONTEXT

The current political agenda parallels the goals of many of the Access to Nature projects. The vision for a Big Society focuses on a belief that people should be empowered to improve their communities and shape the services they receive. The three core strands of the Localism agenda – promoting social action in communities; empowering communities; and opening up public services – all reflect the kinds of ambitions of many of the funded projects. Providing access to the natural environment is a core aspiration of the 2011 Natural Environment White Paper. The NEWP is a landmark document that emphasises the huge value of a resilient natural environment and the vital role it plays in improving people's lives as well as in supporting economic growth. Within Natural England, the commitments to reconnect people with nature; protect natural assets; and maximise the opportunities offered by a greener economy are all priorities that underpin and complement Access to Nature.

ACCESS TO NATURE AND EVALUATION

Natural England took the innovative approach of placing an on-going, outcome focused evaluation process at the heart of the Access to Nature programme; this was the first time that the organisation had taken such a step. Of course it was important that the evaluation would play its part in Natural England's reporting and accountability to the programme's funder, the Big Lottery (BIG). However, there was a parallel vision of the benefits that an on-going process of review and reflection could bring for the individual funded projects and the programme as a whole in understanding progress and outcomes. The result was a substantial commitment from Natural England to evaluating Access to Nature, and to creating a 'Learning Programme'.

In this paper we want to share the experiences of implementing the Access to Nature evaluation process: we explain how the evaluation has been rolled out; outline the key learning about this kind of evaluation based on the practical application of the process; and highlight the raft of benefits that we believe evaluation has brought to the Access to Nature programme and its constituent projects.

WHAT WE MEAN BY EVALUATION
When we use the term evaluation we mean....

The systematic process of gathering and assessing information about a project to learn about how well it is progressing towards what it set out to do.

In the case of Access to Nature we have deployed a **formative evaluation** approach, meaning that the evaluation commenced right at the start of the programme and will continue until it ends. It is an approach that assesses the effectiveness of the projects' approach to both management and delivery, as well as the extent to which they are achieving their outcomes, on an on-going basis. It also includes the parallel assessment of progress with regards to programme management, and an overall aggregation of evidence to understand the impact of the programme as a whole.

There are **two major benefits** of this type of evaluation and these reflect Natural England's aspirations for an iterative and insightful process of on-going review.

- Firstly, it tells the funder and other stakeholders at regular intervals about the progress that has been made as a result of the investment in the programme.

- Secondly, it is about reflective practice and action learning. At programme level it provides insights into the effectiveness of the management so that changes can be made (where feasible) to improve programme delivery. For projects it builds an understanding of the effectiveness of their approach, and how this is affecting the progress they are making towards achieving their outcomes. This kind of critical feedback helps the programme and projects alike to assess whether they are on the right track and to decide where action is needed to amend their approach to management or delivery.

"The project has aimed, from the outset, to achieve a 360 degree evaluation – looking at the participants' experiences of the project, the site experiences/changes, the partners' (both funders and delivery partners) experiences and the staff experiences. The purpose behind this approach was to evaluate not only the outcomes of the project but also the process."

Sowe Valley

THE ACCESS TO NATURE EVALUATION PROCESS

This kind of formative evaluation was new to Natural England and was not commonplace in the environmental sector. We know that Natural England and many of the Access to Nature projects started with little experience in assessing progress against outcomes. We also know that there was a degree of risk in imposing a standardised evaluation approach onto third party projects in a national programme as diverse as this, and where the emphasis would be for projects to manage their own evaluation within an overarching framework. To be successful the evaluation therefore needed a number of factors to be in place.

- **A single, overall structure** – an evaluation framework was developed by Icarus, together with the programme's Evaluation Steering Group, and was applied consistently at both programme and project level throughout the lifetime of Access to Nature.

- **A planned approach** - the evaluation process was guided by three key phases - *planning it*, *doing it* and *using it* – each of which has a number of constituent elements.

PLANNING

Step 1 Decide who needs to be part of the evaluation

Step 2 Selecting good evaluation questions

Step 3 Developing good evaluation methods

Step 4 Creating an evaluation action plan

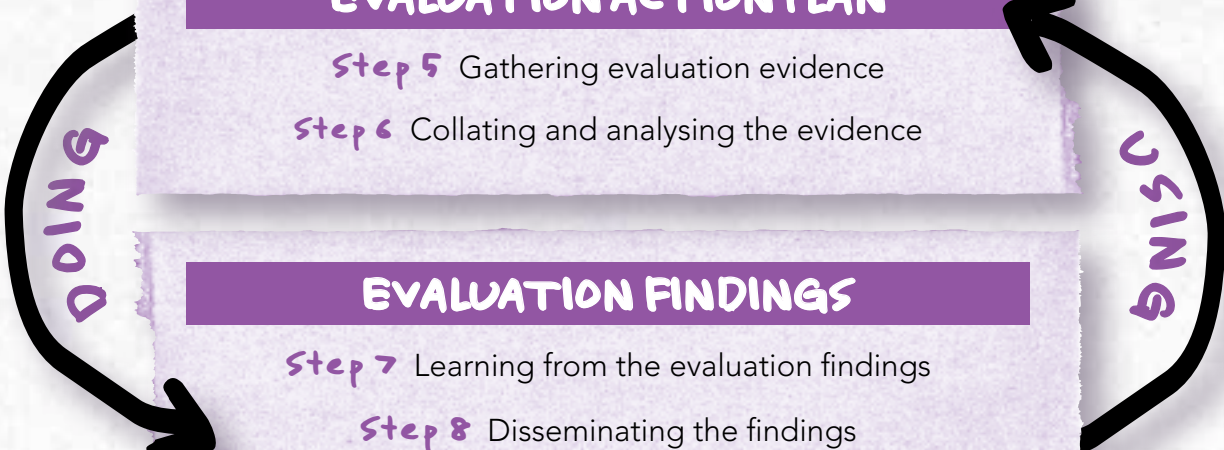### EVALUATION ACTION PLAN

Step 5 Gathering evaluation evidence

Step 6 Collating and analysing the evidence

EVALUATION FINDINGS

Step 7 Learning from the evaluation findings

Step 8 Disseminating the findings

DOING

USING

- **A shared understanding of outcomes** – Icarus and Natural England agreed a process to review the outcomes of each project awarded a grant. This ensured that each funded organisation understood the nature of the changes they were working towards, that those outcomes were SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timebound), and Natural England could be assured that each project's work would align with the programme outcomes and goals.

- **An embedded process** - the goal was to ensure that evaluation was an integral part of Access to Nature and not a 'bolt on' or reporting headache. In practice it was a great achievement that over 90% of projects responded constructively to the evaluation requirements.

- **Skills and expertise in evaluation** – it was important to build skills and expertise in evaluation across Natural England's Access to Nature staff team and in projects, and to an appropriate level. It wasn't necessary for everyone to become an 'evaluation expert', only that they would pro-actively engage in the evaluation process, and could understand the benefits of the reflection and review process that the evaluation facilitated. By providing templates and training, offering on-going support, and giving feedback on evaluation reporting, Icarus ensured that both the Access to Nature team and the projects could engage with the process easily and in a straightforward way, while building their own capacity in evaluation.

- **A feedback loop** – Icarus designed a structured process for delivering constructive feedback on evaluation reports and findings. At a programme level, this involved dialogue and action planning with Natural England and partner bodies, and at project level a written report was produced and fed back to projects through their Natural England Lead Adviser.

- **Useful and usable evaluation products** – Icarus sought to ensure that the evaluation findings it reported provided insights into the programme and that the recommendations were usable and workable. At programme level there have been annual summaries of progress, followed by a post report action planning session; a set of thematic Learning Papers each year; a *Building Good Grants Programmes* paper; a review of the implementation of the Supporting Change and Impact funding; and a forward looking think piece on embedding evaluation in grant programmes across Natural England[1]. At project level the evaluation report template was designed to ensure the Access to Nature evaluation questions were addressed, and to ensure projects gave a well-rounded picture of their own progress.

- **Independent advice and a high degree of trust** – the independent perspective of Icarus was key in ensuring the evaluation process remained on track, and that any difficult issues that emerged from it were not buried. This worked because of the dynamic and positive partnership approach that both Natural England and Icarus bought into, and the trust that developed between them as a result.

There is clearly a lot to learn about applying formative evaluation in practice, both at the programme and the project levels. We share this learning here by using the three evaluation phases as a framework; we outline what each phase involves, how the projects have approached the evaluation requirements, what has happened at the programme level, the challenges that have been encountered, and the added value that has been brought to the programme as a result.

PLANNING IT
About the planning phase

The planning phase		
About the planning phase	**The planning phase at the programme level**	**The planning phase at the project level**
This is the phase that creates the foundations for all the evaluation work that will follow. We wanted projects to organise their thinking around evaluation, and to set out how they would carry out their evaluation from the start to the end of their activity. Equally, it was important that this sat within a programme level evaluation framework that reflected the overarching outcomes.	An evaluation framework and action plan were developed that provided the platform for the England wide evaluation work to be undertaken by Icarus as well as for the project level activity.	Following a review of their outcomes and a training course (both with Icarus), each project created an evaluation action plan in a standard format (see example on the following page). It included an assessment of who should contribute to the evaluation and the questions that form the basis of the evaluation, as well as listing the evaluation methods the project intended to use, the resources needed and a timetable that ensured they would be able to submit their evaluation interim and final reports on time.

Action plan extract

When	Method	Stakeholders	Evaluation questions	Resources
May, July, October	Outcomes star	Beneficiaries	To what extent have we achieved outcomes 2, 3 and 4? What has worked and what challenges have been faced?	Staff time: plan the questions, use with project participants, analyse
May, September	Focus group	Beneficiaries	To what extent have we achieved outcomes 2 and 5? What has worked and what challenges have been faced?	Staff time: plan questions, set up focus group, run focus group, analyse Room hire Dictaphone
September	Steering group review	Partners	To what extent have we achieved outcome 5? What has worked and what challenges have been faced?	Staff time: plan questions, attend meeting, collate, analyse Room hire Projector

PLANNING EVALUATION
Case study: Wild Places

Wild Places engaged diverse communities, many with low-level education and skills, learning difficulties and / or disabilities, limited language skills and low-level communication skills, for example. Their evaluation action plan sought to find ways of capturing evidence from their participants in an appropriate and usable way, as well as from other stakeholders. A variety of methods were planned including structured registration sheets, informal feedback captured in note form or via Dictaphone, comments book, pictorial expression and smiley face scoring. Prize draws were envisaged as a way of incentivising people to take part in evaluation exercises. Project partners were to be engaged in evaluation through structured feedback at Steering Group meetings, taking the opportunity to utilise time when they were already meeting. In practice the project found the evaluation to be a learning experience as they began to understand which tools and techniques worked best, and which needed to be adapted.

> "the team constantly experimented with feedback methodologies to ensure that how the project was impacting on the lives of individuals was being captured, but also the impact on the community centres themselves."
>
> Wild Places

What were the challenges in the planning phase?

The feedback at programme level and from projects suggests the logical and organised process of planning the evaluation was an extremely valuable one. A small number of projects did experience difficulties in matching their evaluation plans with the reality of their delivery, and these experiences point to learning for future programmes.

- **Projects can be unrealistic in understanding the resources needed to evaluate well -** self evaluation was a new area of work for some projects. Some did not allocate sufficient resources for the task; others found it difficult to embed evaluation in their day to day work or misunderstood evaluation to be an additional burden, rather than an opportunity to improve practice.

- **Projects can lack the experience to choose the most appropriate evaluation methods -** a degree of skill and experience is needed when it comes to selecting evaluation methods and this was new for some projects. Others were working with different kinds of beneficiary groups for the first time and were learning as they went about the kinds of approaches that might work.

- **Projects need to ensure the right people complete the plan and understand what was needed to put it into practice** - to be workable and embedded, with the capacity for sufficient reflective analysis, the evaluation action plans needed to be developed by management and delivery staff working together.

THE ADDED VALUE FROM THE PLANNING PHASE

Strong foundations for good evaluation were put in place
Creating the overarching evaluation framework and action plan ensured that every evaluation activity within Access to Nature was both relevant and appropriate to understanding progress at both the programme and project levels, as well as feeding in to reviewing and adapting management and delivery as a result.

There was a clear understanding of the evaluation requirements across Access to Nature
The process of training projects and Natural England staff helped develop a working relationship around evaluation, built mutual understanding of the benefits of formative evaluation, and emphasised that projects were working with a flexible and meaningful reporting system.

Evaluation activity was outcome focused
An outcome review process undertaken by Icarus with each project added value to the work of each organisation delivering Access to Nature, and also enabled Natural England to be confident that the evaluation would gather evidence which was relevant to the programme outcomes agreed with BIG. The decision to review and clearly define project outcomes was taken early in the Access to Nature lifetime when Icarus concluded that the prevailing focus on targets and monitoring was in danger of distracting from evidencing against outcomes.

There was an established and agreed timetable to work with
Each project had an action plan which set out the steps to be taken to gather evaluation data, and when those steps were to be taken. Similarly a detailed project plan existed at programme level, reinforcing the message that the evaluation should be on-going and an embedded process.

Projects had a reference point they could refer back to

The fact that each project had its evaluation action plan and a clear direction for its evaluation activity helped in the transfer of key messages about expectations and processes to new staff when project staff moved on. Icarus also provided an Evaluation Handbook to each project as a permanent reference source.

"(There have been) changes in line management…. very clear monitoring and evaluation resources have helped new staff get to know the project a lot easier…"

A Wealth of Wildlife

Natural England and the programme evaluators could be confident that projects were integrating evaluation into their project delivery

The Access to Nature evaluation process made sure that projects weren't tempted to put off the task of considering how to evaluate their work … as we have witnessed in other programmes. Equally, there existed a commitment at programme level to follow the over-arching evaluation action plan.

"A very clear work programme and evaluation action plan have made managing the project very effective"

Wildways

Added value for projects…

Here's what projects have said they found useful about the planning phase when attending one of our 'hands on' self evaluation training workshops:

✓ A method we will use again to simplify projects
✓ Identifying who needs to be included — helped narrow down who to involve
✓ Prioritising stakeholders to give a focus
✓ Opportunity to take time out to plan and reflect
✓ Finding out about creative evaluation methods
✓ Relating evaluation to the outcomes

DOING IT
About the doing phase

The doing phase

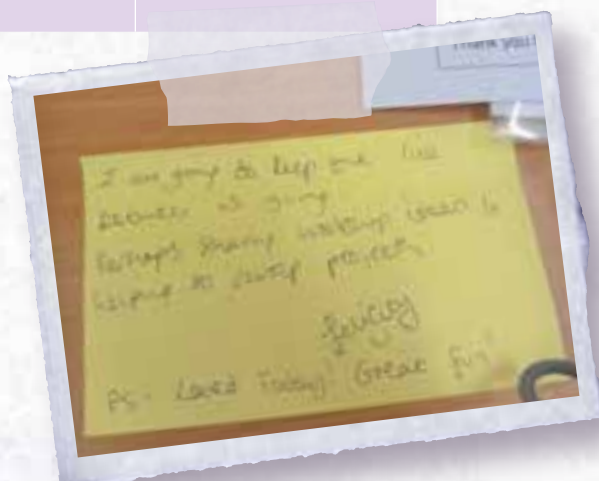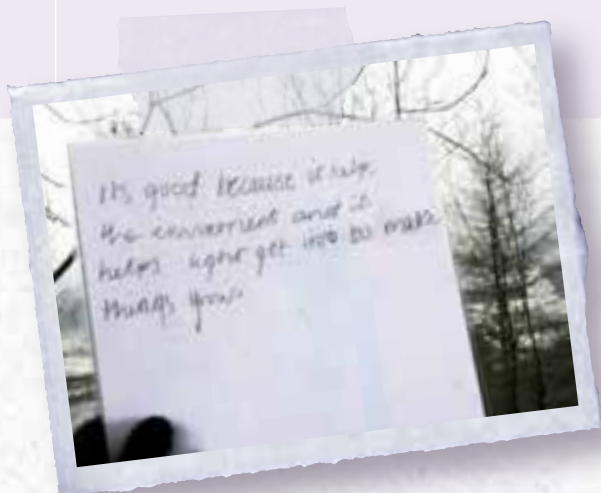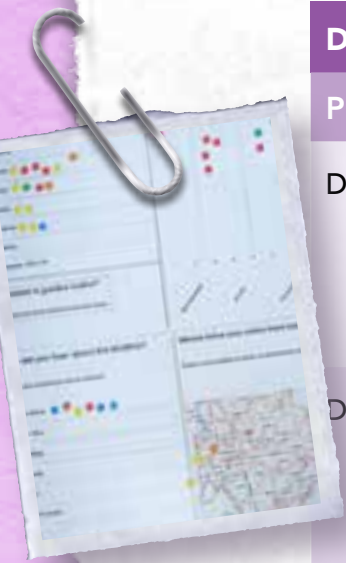| About the doing phase	The doing phase at the programme level	The doing phase at the project level
It is in this phase that the evaluation action plan is being put into practice, at programme and project level. The goal was to integrate evaluation activities into the work programme and to take the time necessary to review progress in a constructive and useful way.	Each year Icarus undertook research with the programme team and partners to help inform learning about the overall management of Access to Nature. This provided a wider perspective on the delivery of the programme and complemented the analysis of evidence coming from the individual project evaluation reports.	The projects routinely applied their evaluation methods and collected their evidence. They brought their data together to analyse and to make sense of their progress to date. They summarised their findings in the interim and final evaluation reports they have produced which are also submitted to Icarus and Natural England and have generally been of a high quality. Most of the projects undertook the evaluation as an internal exercise, while a few employed external evaluation consultants to work alongside them.

What was very encouraging and exciting about the projects' approaches to evaluation was their willingness to find creative ways of capturing evaluation evidence from different people. On the following page we share some examples of the different methods they have used.

Doing evaluation: examples of evaluation methods projects have used		
Project	**The method**	**Good for**
Nature of Art in Wessex	**Evaluation flowers or butterflies:** Each petal or wing is used to write a comment about the event, guided by simple questions such as 'please tell use what you enjoyed', 'tell us about what you didn't enjoy', 'what have you learnt today?'	Children Adults with less confidence in formal, written methods Best used indoors
Nature of Art in Wessex	**Pictorial reflections:** Participants draw their feelings or responses to set questions	Very young children People with learning difficulties Adults with Alzheimer's Best used indoors
Explore Moor	**Nest boxes:** Participants are invited to cast a vote for four questions which relate to the project outcomes by posting tokens into the nest box of their choice, each one representing an option from a very positive response to a very negative response	Children Perfect to use outdoors
Explore Moor	**Blank postcards:** Self addressed postcards are given to participants so they can reflect on their experience with the project and return the card some time afterwards	Children Adults For outdoor or indoor settings
Rowan Earth	**Individual learning plans:** Benchmarking participants' skills, knowledge and experience at the start of a programme and recording progress each time they are involved with the project to build a picture of the impact of the project on them as individuals	Learners in formal or informal settings Both adults and children Best used indoors

Doing evaluation: examples of evaluation methods projects have used		
Project	**The method**	**Good for**
Dove Stone	**Laminate snap shots:** Participants are posed questions and they write their response using dry markers on a laminated card, then photograph it – this provides 'snap shots' of a group's thoughts	Children Adults Perfect for outdoors use
Dove Stone	**Sticker evaluation:** Questions relevant to an event or activity are printed out onto large sheets and participants use stickers to give their responses	Children (they love stickers!) Adults Great at big events For outdoor or indoor settings
Woodland Communities	**Video box:** A 'Big Brother Diary Room' style set up where participants are invited to respond to questions / discuss the project while they are being filmed	Perfect for young adults Great for events For outdoor or indoor settings
A Wealth of Wildlife	**Dictaphone recording:** Great to capture informal discussion and 'throw away' comments that provide valuable anecdotes to support empirical evidence	Children Adults For outdoor or indoor settings or even en route to activities
Walk on the Wildside	**Focus groups:** Detailed, structured and facilitated discussion around several evaluation questions	Project participants Project partners Good for small groups, up to 8 people Probably indoors but would work outdoors in decent weather

Doing evaluation: *examples of evaluation methods projects have used*		
Project	**The method**	**Good for**
Young Carers Nature Challenge	Self reflection: Staff take time out to reflect on their experience of the project, noting their thoughts on a database	Project staff Project partners
Young Carers Nature Challenge	Project diary: Project staff document conversations of interest with project participants and their families	All project beneficiaries
Wild Places	Smiley faces: Simple sheets are used with an evaluation question at the top and three possible responses indicated by a smiley, sad or intermediate face; the participant simply ticks their face that represents their response to the question	Young children People with learning difficulties Best used indoors
Access to Nature through the John Muir Award	Structured questionnaires /online surveys: To establish the views to evaluation questions in some detail	Project partners Project participants Can go to a large number of people Postal, face to face or online use
Rowan Earth	Face to face interviews: Structured interviews using a standard and consistent question set	Project partners Other key stakeholders Project participants

What were the challenges in the doing phase?

We know from what projects have told us that evaluation can be a rewarding and inspiring process which connects practitioners and managers with beneficiaries; improves listening, understanding, and building of knowledge; and encourages constructive and critical reflection. We have also heard that implementing an evaluation action plan is not always easy: ideas that look good on paper are not always straightforward to implement and balancing delivery time with evaluation activity can be challenging. A significant majority of projects handled these difficulties well, and were able to devise strategies that ensured they could produce high quality, useful evaluation reports. The feedback from the evaluation process provides a number of insights related to the challenges of delivering evaluation.

- **It can be hard to put evaluation action plans into practice** – a small minority of projects did not fully implement their action plans and as a result were not able to undertake robust evaluation activity. For some this was a resource issue, for others staff changes disrupted progress. There were also a very few projects that just didn't really buy in to the concept of self evaluation. At programme level there were challenges at times in responding to the evaluation recommendations due to organisational culture issues and lack of commitment by those who could sanction changes.

"The project team devised an evaluation action plan at the outset... the implementation of this plan was however somewhat ad hoc ...(as a result) an independent evaluator will work alongside the project for the second half of the programme."

Wildlife in the City

- **Getting a good fit with existing evaluation processes within organisations can take time** - some organisations had existing recording and evaluation approaches and faced the challenge of integrating those with the Access to Nature process.

- **Projects can choose evaluation methods which are not always fit for purpose** - it was only once evaluation activity commenced that it was possible to know if the selected methods were completely fit for purpose. For most projects this then involved a degree of testing and refining. A small number of projects only realised that their methods had not generated usable and relevant evidence when they came to write their interim evaluation report.

DOING EVALUATION CASE STUDY:
Young Carers Nature Challenge

This was a project that worked hard to adapt evaluation methods in the light of their experience. In the period up to its interim report it used a variety of approaches including project diaries, reflective learning journals, photographs and qualitative evaluation forms. Each method was chosen with good intent, though a lack of consistency in application and the questions used by the project led to difficulties in obtaining quantitative data. The choice of regular face-to-face feedback meetings with the young carers and their families proved to be impractical as it was impossible to arrange a time and place when they could come together. Telephone interviews with participants gathered some statistical data to measure the project's progress against its SMART outcomes, but some of the language used in questions about a sense of 'ownership' wasn't easily understood.

The Project Officer was able to reflect on this initial experience of the evaluation and put in place methods that were more suited to the participants and which importantly gave them the kinds of evidence they needed. Standardised evaluation forms were completed together with the young carers at the end of every activity, sometimes transferring the questions to large and colourful posters. Questionnaires were used with site owners and partner organisations; conversations with young carers' families were routinely documented; project officers recorded their experiences of each event in a database; and the observation of young carers playing and learning "*guaranteed an honest, real account of how they felt about the nature challenge*". **The end product was a detailed and insightful final evaluation report, able to eloquently highlight and evidence its own key learning** "*…. we only realised (this key learning) by being aware of and responding to the feedback given to us by the young carers, their families and all the stakeholders involved*".

THE ADDED VALUE FROM THE DOING PHASE

A considerable body of evidence and learning was generated
The application of a standardised process, within a common evaluation framework, created a huge body of evidence about the impact of Access to Nature, as well as learning about managing a programme of this scale and the relative merits of different ways of working with people with very little experience of the natural world. This gave individual projects valuable insights into the progress of their work, as well as data that could be aggregated to create a programme wide picture. This resulted in Icarus suggesting changing the approach to reporting progress; as a result a series of thematic Learning Papers were created that didn't just describe projects' achievements, but also captured the challenges they faced and how the evaluation had contributed to successful delivery.

"The external evaluation report has proved very insightful and a really useful exercise for the Festival."

The Nature of Art in Wessex

Skills and expertise in evaluation have grown
The structure of Access to Nature's evaluation process, with its standardisation and pro-forma reporting, enabled projects with lower level skills and expertise in evaluation to engage constructively and positively with the evaluation of their work. These are skills that are transferable to other projects within the host and partner organisations, and are extremely valuable as a result. Natural England staff working on Access to Nature also enthusiastically embraced the evaluation process. Their skills and confidence grew over time and they were able to use this knowledge to shape the design and implementation of the Supporting Change and Impact programme; this body of expertise will be a lasting legacy and asset for Natural England. Overall, the evaluation process has created a stronger base of skills across the sector in England in evaluation and understanding the impact of work to engage people in the natural environment.

"We did not appoint an external evaluator for the project. With the input of Icarus, we found that internal evaluation had much more impact on the team and the project."

Wild Places

Good evaluation practice has been embedded

In addition to the growth of skills, the practice of planning, doing and using formative evaluation has become established in many organisations, including the Natural England team members. Feedback from projects consistently noted the shift in attitude from practitioners and managers towards a more integrated evaluation approach within their work.

> "It has helped me to see what has worked/ not worked, so I could make the necessary amendments. It has been an invaluable tool, which the project beneficiaries have benefitted from."

End of project survey response

The quality of outdoor experience for beneficiaries has been improved

Good use of formative evaluation, coupled with the practice of producing and reviewing interim reports, has given the chance to projects to adjust their practice, thus enhancing the quality of experience on offer to participants.

> "This was Natural England's opportunity to learn too – a more holistic approach than one that is entirely top down."

Access to Nature Evaluation Reference Group member

Access to Nature was a programme with learning at its heart

The evaluation process created a programme with a strong focus on learning. The individual interim and final evaluation reports emphasised the degree to which projects embraced the opportunity to take a step back and critically reflect on their practice. Icarus' programme wide evaluation reports and thematic Learning Papers were similarly useful in helping Natural England understand what impact this investment was making, as a well as being an impartial assessment of the programme management. This was enabled by the approach that was taken – that of a learning programme. The process of capturing recommendations for action and identifying lessons for future programmes gave Natural England a sense of what was possible; not just a mammoth list that seemed unachievable.

Natural England understand what works in engaging hard to reach groups

The structure of the evaluation, the regular reporting, the reflective sessions with Natural England staff and partners, and the emphasis on learning all provided Natural England with an opportunity to genuinely understand how their grant making, and the support they have offered, impacted on people and natural spaces. Natural England's knowledge of how to run a good grants programme and how to achieve engagement in communities was improved by the evaluative approach.

USING IT
About the using it phase

The using it phase		
About the using it phase	**The using it phase at the programme level**	**The using it phase at the project level**
This is the crucial phase where the programme and projects get the return on their investment in evaluation by using their evaluation findings. It is also the point at which Natural England, its consortium partners and BIG take stock of what is emerging from the programme as a whole to inform their own policies and activities.	Natural England engaged in an action planning process after each annual evaluation report where they reflected on the findings and recommendations and thereafter instigated any changes to the management systems that were necessary. It also shared the findings across the sector, as well as with BIG and its consortium partners. The influence of the evaluation process has been wide ranging and this is summarised below.	With the prominent focus on learning in Access to Nature projects have been pro-active in their approach to using their learning to inform their work and influence their future activity. This contrasts with other programmes where a report can often mark the end of the evaluation process and there is limited scope to learn from the findings as a result. We summarise some of the ways in which projects are using their evaluations below.

What were the challenges in the using it phase?

As Access to Nature drew to a close, the climate in which it was operating was significantly different to that at the start. It is unlikely that anyone involved in the programme could have anticipated exactly how this would look. This has made using the learning emerging from the work challenging.

- **An uncertain operating climate can dissipate the impact of the learning -** with an uncertain funding climate for the public and the voluntary sectors alike, both Natural England and some projects struggled to see how they would have any opportunity to apply their learning beyond the end of Access to Nature. They have experienced internal cuts and re-organisations, difficulties in engaging equally hard pressed partners, and the scope for further funding or mainstreaming became extremely limited.

THE ADDED VALUE OF THE USING IT PHASE

Evaluation is not an end in itself

We know that evaluation is important for accountability and reporting, but it should not be an end in itself. The way the Access to Nature evaluation process was designed aimed to emphasise the importance of using the learning in pro-active and positive ways at the project and programme and policy levels.

These examples illustrate how projects have used their learning from the Access to Nature evaluation process:

- Evaluation has confirmed that Access to Nature projects were on track to achieve what they set out to do.

"The requirement to submit regular reports...has proved positive; this requirement necessitates a continual review process to be in place to gauge the success, or otherwise, of the methodology employed...such a process is recognised as being very beneficial to both the project and use as an organisation."

Environmental Education and Access Programme

- Using evaluation learning as it emerged informed changes to the management and delivery of Access to Nature projects.

It is essential that we learn from the experiences our project has brought, both good and bad, so that the Trust and project partners can weave them into future work."

The Woodland Communities Project

- Evaluation has affirmed the impact on people's lives.

"This project has given me a purpose in life where there was none."

Rowan Earth participant

- Evaluation has ensured projects were able to give a robust, evidenced picture of their progress.

"One of the key messages emerging from the evaluation is that young people have benefited from the Explore Moor Project on many levels, as captured in their postcard feedback."

Explore Moor

- Evaluation has provided insights that have informed future work.

"Enabling us to understand what we achieved and lessons for any future work."

End of project survey response

- Evaluation has given projects a competitive edge in seeking future funding given their capacity to evidence the validity of their approach.

"We appreciate that reductions in funding make for a more competitive market. We believe that quality of service delivery will be paramount in securing future funding and contracts. Key to this will be evidencing the impact of the project's delivery, of how the project has been managed, how it's made a difference to community, conservation and people's lives. Capturing this evidence not only as a quantitative measure but also on a qualitative level allows Rowan to prove credibility on all levels and become a stronger competitor in the funding marketplace, and an organisation which adds value to other organisations seeking new working partners."

Rowan Earth

At the programme/policy level the Access to Nature evaluation findings exerted influence in a number of ways:

- **Evaluation has informed the structure of other Natural England funding programmes** – *for example, the key learning points from Access to Nature were used in the development of the Paths for Communities grant scheme and the Nature Improvement Areas programme.*

- **Evaluation has influenced the implementation of formative evaluation processes for other Natural England initiatives** *- initiatives such as Natural Connections used the Access to Nature evaluation process as a reference point for developing their own formative evaluation.*

- **The evaluation has built an evidence base about working in the natural environment with people who have little or no previous experience of it** – *the thematic Learning Papers have reflected the learning from projects back to the wider sector and helped build the evidence base on how 'hard to reach' beneficiaries can be engaged to enjoy, learn about and care for the natural environment.*

- **The evidence has been used to build the case for better working relationships** – *evidence from an Access to Nature Learning Paper was used to influence the writing of a paper by the Defra Network outlining their offer to LEPs and City Deals; in particular this was around the use the natural environment to provide training and development opportunities to help get people into jobs and provide career development, including apprenticeships for people not in employment, education or training (NEETs).*

- **Evaluation has contributed to the design and bidding process for further funding** – *the formative evaluation of Access to Nature helped Natural England successfully bid for and establish the Supporting Change and Impact tranche of funding (from BIG) available to Access to Nature projects.*

- **Evaluation has informed the design of other Natural England funding proposals** – *for example, information from Access to Nature was used to put together proposals to influence the future direction of new funding for BIG.*

- **Evaluation has evidenced progress to strategic partners** – *BIG had a clear picture of the impact its funding had via Access to Nature and used this to both assess its current investments and also work with its own partners, Government and other funders to demonstrate the effectiveness of certain mechanisms and delivery models.*

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNT ABOUT THE FORMATIVE EVALUATION OF ACCESS TO NATURE

Reading the Access to Nature projects' evaluation reports was inspiring and uplifting in equal measure. Not only did they highlight the big impact the projects had on people's lives and the natural environment, but they also helped us to understand the best approaches for working with the Access to Nature target groups and what management structures within organisations are enabling in this regard.

The fact that the reports were candid, objective and analytical in most cases is a testament to the degree to which the projects truly understood the benefits that a formative evaluation process can bring. These benefits are numerous and substantial and have been highlighted throughout this paper. It was also the case that the quality of the evidence enabled Icarus to aggregate progress at a programme wide level and communicate the 'big picture' of the difference that BIG's investment is making.

At the programme level, the relationship between Natural England and Icarus was influential in the success of the evaluation process. Natural England fully embraced the concept of formative evaluation, and with the support of Icarus, was able to 'lead by example'. Everything that was expected of the individual projects was evident in Natural England's approach. They critically reviewed and reflected on their practice, dealt with challenges head on, and were able to build a highly successful programme capable of responding to feedback and accepting the need for change when it was identified.

This paper started by saying that there is a lot to learn from Access to Nature about how to apply formative self evaluation in practice, and also that there was an inherent risk in imposing a standardised approach. While there have been challenges and everyone involved has been on a learning journey, the picture overall is overwhelmingly positive and that risk has certainly paid off. Access to Nature was a programme that had learning at its heart. It generated a huge resource of learning about processes and impact alike. It will be leaving a legacy of good project delivery on the ground; a body of individuals and organisations who have developed sophisticated skills and expertise in evaluation; and a collective memory of how employing a reflective and analytical approach through formative evaluation added real value to both individual projects and the programme as a whole.

FACT FILES

Project Fact File

Name	Dove Stone
Lead	RSPB
What	Engaged community, educational and youth groups around Oldham in the natural environment around Dove Stone reservoir, developing a greater sense of ownership of the natural assets by local communities.
Website	www.rspb.org.uk

Project Fact File

Name	Environmental Education and Action Programme
Lead	Nottinghamshire YMCA
What	Provides greater opportunities for experiential outdoor and environmental education for young people aged 11-25 and families experiencing socio-economic and environmental deprivation throughout Nottinghamshire.
Website	www.nottsymca.org

Project Fact File

Name	Explore Moor
Lead	RSPB
What	Aimed to connect young people from schools and community groups in and around Carlisle with the Geltsdale nature reserve, an internationally important upland site.
Website	www.rspb.org.uk

Project Fact File

Name	John Muir Award in the North East
Lead	Oases (Durham County Council)
What	Aims to engage and motivate children and young people to connect with nature through the use of the John Muir Award, and to grow the number of providers of the Award across the North East.
Website	There is no specific website for this project

Project Fact File

Name	Nature of Art in Wessex
Lead	Salisbury Festival
What	Increasing access to nature through the arts in six sites across Wessex. Working in disadvantaged areas with young people, older people and those with disabilities.
Website	www.salisburyfestival.co.uk

Project Fact File

Name	Rowan Earth
Lead	Rowan Training and Enterprise CIC
What	Aimed to actively engage with deprived communities across South Yorkshire through a six week programme of learning workshops in the natural environment and an annual community outdoor festival.
Website	www.rowancic.org.uk

Project Fact File

Name	Sowe Valley Project
Lead	Warwickshire Wildlife Trust
What	Aims to reconnect, both physically and mentally, the local community with the Sowe River Valley and improve the valley's biodiversity and habitats for the benefits of people and wildlife.
Website	www.warwickshirewildlifetrust.org.uk/sowe-valley-project

Project Fact File

Name	Walk on the Wildside
Lead	Castle Cavendish Foundation
What	Aims to work with schools and community groups to forge stronger relationships with the natural environment in highly deprived areas in the heart of Nottingham.
Website	www.castlecavendish.org.uk

Project Fact File

Name	Wealth of Wildlife
Lead	Lancashire Wildlife Trust
What	Aims to connect communities with the inland coastal and marine environments of Morecambe Bay.
Website	www.lancswt.org.uk/wow

Project Fact File

Name	Wild at Heart
Lead	Groundwork Cheshire
What	Supports groups of pupils from 16 special schools in Cheshire through an environmental award; promotes learning in the natural environment; trains school staff in outdoor environmental activities and builds links between the schools and local green spaces.
Website	www.northwest.groundwork.org.uk

Project Fact File

Name	Wild Places
Lead	Octopus Community Network
What	Aims to equip local people with the skills and confidence to develop their unique biodiversity habitats in and around four community centres.
Website	www.octopuscommunities.org.uk

Project Fact File

Name	Wildlife in the City
Lead	Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust
What	Aims to inspire and support a great number of people living in economically deprived areas of Nottingham to access, enjoy and contribute to the maintenance of green spaces.
Website	www.nottinghamshirewildlife.org

Project Fact File

Name	Wildways
Lead	South Gloucestershire Council
What	Engaging residents from Priority Neighbourhood communities in South Gloucestershire in natural environment projects.
Website	www.southglos.gov.uk

Project Fact File

Name	Woodland Communities Project
Lead	Woodland Trust
What	Woodlands Communities Project aimed to inspire people living near 10 selected Woodland Trust sites around Warrington and Runcorn to regularly use their local woods as places within which to exercise, enjoy nature, spend time with family and friends, relax, learn, heal and play.
Website	www.woodlandtrust.org.uk

Project Fact File

Name	Young Carers Nature Challenge
Lead	The Conservation Volunteers
What	Provides young carers respite from their caring responsibilities, whilst also giving them opportunities to discover and explore the natural world through a range of nature-based games and practical conversation activities.
Website	www.tcv.org.uk

ABOUT ACCESS TO NATURE

Access to Nature is a scheme run by Natural England and funded by the Big Lottery Fund. Natural England works on behalf of a consortium of eleven other major environmental organisations and distributes £28.75 million Lottery funding under the scheme, which has been developed to encourage more people to enjoy the outdoors, particularly those with little or no previous contact with the natural environment. Funded projects range from local community based schemes through to national initiatives from large organisations. Diversity in scale is mirrored by a diversity and richness of projects, from equipment to allow people with disabilities to access the natural environment; supporting disadvantaged groups and those who ordinarily face barriers to visiting the countryside; as well as many projects which are providing a range of volunteering and educational opportunities for local communities and young people.

FOOTNOTE

1   See: Natural England Publications and Products - Access to Nature (A2N) publications

ALTERNATIVE FORMATS

Our documents are available as pdf downloads from our website, suitable for text reader technology. We may be able to provide other formats (e.g. Braille, a minority language, or large print) for specific documents where there is a proven communication need.

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PHOTO CREDITS

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