

Defra project code: WC1061

# Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Year 2 (2013-14) Progress Report

## Executive Summary

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### Introduction

The establishment of the Nature Improvement Area (NIA) programme was announced in the Natural Environment White Paper (NEWP) – *Natural choice – securing the value of nature* (HM Government, 2011a). NIAs are large, discrete areas where a local partnership has a shared vision for their natural environment that are intended to deliver a ‘step change’ in nature conservation. The programme takes forward the recommendations of the Lawton review, *Making space for nature* (Lawton *et al.*, 2010).

The NIA M&E Phase 2 project is supporting the delivery of NEWP commitment 11 “[Defra] will capture the learning from NIAs, and review whether further action is needed in planning policy, regulation or capacity building, to support their development”.

The 12 initial Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) aim to provide better places for wildlife, to improve the natural environment for people, and to unite local communities, land managers and businesses through a shared vision. They are trying out different approaches. The variety of landscapes, objectives, and partnerships seen across the NIAs reflects this purpose. A consistent approach for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) was adopted to assess what works well, and potentially not so well, and to take stock overall. The NIA partnerships are applying several concepts where the practical use of science is still developing, for example relating to restoration of habitat connectivity and ecosystem services. This innovative, experimental and developmental work needs to be borne in mind when considering the results of this evaluation of the first two years of progress.

The 12 initial NIA partnerships started work in April 2012 and the Year 2 (2013-14) Progress Report follows the Year 1 (2012-13) Progress Report<sup>1</sup> which was published in September 2013. It presents an overview of their delivery during two years of operation. The Year 2 Progress Report also starts to consider the potential longer-term ‘legacy’ impacts of the NIA programme that may be realised beyond the NIA partnerships’ three year grant funding period. These impacts will be more fully considered by the evaluation at the end of the three years of grant funding and reported towards the end of 2015.

### Summary of the monitoring and evaluation purpose and process

The 12 initial NIA partnerships undertake monitoring and evaluation following a framework which includes four themes: biodiversity; ecosystem services; social and economic benefits and contributions to wellbeing; and partnership working. The framework enables the NIA partnerships to measure the progress towards their objectives. The framework includes ‘core’ indicators that have been adopted by all the NIA partnerships, while the others are optional. Overall it provides a consistent approach across all the NIAs. The NIA partnerships use an online reporting tool specifically developed to record their monitoring data. The NIA partnerships also report on progress quarterly, including financial monitoring and progress against their agreed objectives and outputs.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5542385517854720>

The overall approach to the evaluation of the NIA programme draws on guidance in the Magenta Book<sup>2</sup>. A logic model<sup>3</sup> approach was used to provide the overall framework within which the evaluation was designed. The approach is a combination of a process and impact evaluation – focussing on both how the NIA partnerships are delivering their objectives, as well as on what and how much they are delivering for biodiversity, ecosystem services and social and economic wellbeing.

In Year 3, the M&E project will include research to further understand the difference the NIA partnerships have made over and above what would have happened anyway without their introduction.

## Overview of key progress and achievements at the end of Year 2 in the 12 initial NIAs

### Creating more, bigger, better and less fragmented places for wildlife

- The NIA partnerships have managed or are currently managing<sup>4</sup> a total of **7,451ha to create or restore priority habitats**; and **11,342ha to maintain or improve priority habitat condition**.
- Actions are also currently planned to **create or restore a further 2,889ha of priority habitat**; and **maintain or improve the condition of a further 2,518ha**.
- In total, actions to restore / create and maintain / improve priority habitat have been completed, are ongoing or are planned on **24,200ha, or 4.7%, of the total area of the 12 initial NIAs**.
- The NIA partnerships have also reported on actions to create or improve boundary and linear priority habitats such as hedgerows and riparian buffers. A total of **87km of boundary and linear priority habitat has been restored or created**; and **183km have been managed to maintain or improve condition**. Further work is also planned for **18km of boundary and linear priority habitat**.
- **The habitat creation and restoration works within the NIAs are helping to improve habitat connectivity**, addressing the objectives of more, bigger, better joined. The increase in connectivity is difficult to quantify, but NIA partnership research and reporting has added to the understanding of how to deliver improved connectivity and how to measure change.
- The NIA partnerships have delivered **activities to enhance the status<sup>5</sup> of focal<sup>6</sup> and widespread<sup>7</sup> species**. NIA partnerships are actively improving data and knowledge of species status in their areas through species surveys.

### Enhancing the benefits that nature provides for people

- The NIA partnerships have worked to improve access to and enhance people's experiences of the natural environment; for example four NIA partnerships have reported that a total length of **10.5km of public rights of way and permissive paths have been improved or created**, with **access improved to a further 532km**.

<sup>2</sup> HM Government (2011) *The Magenta Book: Guidance for evaluation*. London, HM Treasury.

<sup>3</sup> A logic model seeks to understand the complexity of a policy intervention and the relationship between an intervention's inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts.

<sup>4</sup> Note that these figures include actions that are underway and completed.

<sup>5</sup> Note that species status includes both abundance and distribution.

<sup>6</sup> Focal species in this context refers to species of high conservation status that are the focus of actions or sensitive to drivers of change that are a specific concern within an NIA.

<sup>7</sup> Widespread species refers to species defined as such and monitored through the relevant English Biodiversity 2020 indicators, see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/england-biodiversity-indicators>

- All the NIA partnerships have designed and delivered activities with the explicit objective of providing education and learning benefits. In the three NIAs that reported on this at the end Year 2, a total of **11,739 people had participated in educational visits**<sup>8</sup>.
- A total of **24,326 days of volunteer time** was reported, with volunteers being engaged in activities including habitat improvements and species surveys. The majority of this time (23,791 days) was on types of volunteering also likely to result in health and wellbeing benefits.
- The NIA partnerships are improving ecosystem services; for example, in the three NIAs that reported it, a total of **9,189ha of habitat had been managed to improve water quality**<sup>9</sup>.
- Across the seven NIA partnerships that reported it, **the proportion of woodlands in active management increased by 3% between baseline (2012) and the end of Year 2** (compared to a 2% increase nationally over the same period).
- The NIA partnerships have been undertaking activities explicitly seeking to **deliver local economic benefits**. Six NIA partnerships have reported on their approaches to deliver economic benefits. They have used two main approaches: supporting the production and exchange of natural products, particularly wood fuel; and place-based marketing focussing on the character of the NIA and the natural environment.

### Working with local communities, land managers and businesses

- **All the NIA partnerships have engaged with their local communities** through activities such as: organising and participating in events; engaging local people as volunteers; reaching out to schools and community groups to provide education and hands-on learning opportunities; and encouraging community involvement in decision making.
- The NIA partnerships have been **working with land managers and businesses** and bringing different types of organisation together. NIA partnerships have supported farmers in securing Environmental Stewardship funding and implementing sustainable land management practices. **Businesses are involved as partners in 10 of the NIA partnerships**.

### Places of inspiration and innovation

- **All the NIA partnerships are engaged in activities that are either contributing to research or innovation**, including through working with universities.
- The NIA partnerships' **community engagement and volunteering activities have provided opportunities for learning and education** as well as knowledge exchange. All NIA partnerships have held events, created websites and developed publicity materials, such as newsletters.

## Evaluation of biodiversity outcomes and impacts

At the end of Year 2 the key messages from the evaluation of outcomes and impacts for biodiversity include:

- **The NIA partnerships are making good progress: 73% of objectives in their funding agreements were assessed<sup>10</sup> as being on, or ahead of, target;** 24% were assessed as not in line with original milestones but where satisfactory or good progress had been made; and only one objective across all the NIA partnerships was assessed as having no, little or only some progress.

<sup>8</sup> An educational visit is defined as any organised visit to an NIA site or centre (e.g. visitor centre) which has an explicit educational objective.

<sup>9</sup> This may include habitat also reported as being managed to create, restore, maintain or improve priority habitat.

<sup>10</sup> Note that these assessments were based on a self-assessment of progress by all the NIA partnerships against their own objectives reported in their Progress Reports which the evaluation team analyses and categorised according to the progress made towards project outcomes and original milestones (see Appendix 2 to the main report for further details on the approach).

- **Just over 10% of the total extent of priority habitat within all NIAs is subject to new management actions by NIA partners under the NIA programme.**
- **Lowland Grassland and Heath** is the predominant habitat grouping where new management actions by NIA partners under the NIA programme are underway or complete, with **nearly 18% of the total area of these habitats in the NIAs being subject to management.**
- **The NIA partnerships are actively improving data and knowledge of species status in their areas through species surveys,** and there are numerous examples where NIA partnerships have initiated habitat management to meet the needs of species.
- The NIA partnerships have undertaken **research, tested approaches and shared experience in delivering and measuring habitat connectivity on a landscape scale.**

## Evaluation of ecosystem services outcomes and impacts

At the end of Year 2 the key messages from the evaluation of outcomes and impacts for ecosystem services include:

- **The NIA partnerships are making reasonable progress: 55% of relevant objectives in their funding agreements were assessed as being on, or ahead of schedule;** the remaining 45% were behind schedule but there has been ‘satisfactory or good’ progress.
- **All the NIA partnerships have contributed to improved delivery of ecosystem services.** This has been achieved through activities explicitly seeking to achieve this outcome (e.g. increased carbon storage / sequestration) as well as an outcome of other activities, such as habitat creation and improvement which also affect ecosystem service provision. The NIA partnerships’ activities and projects have improved a range of:
  - **cultural services** by, for example, enhancing landscape character, increasing access to greenspace and facilitating understanding of the natural environment;
  - **supporting services** by, for example, improving conditions for pollinators; and
  - **regulating services** by, for example, changing land management to improve water quality and increase carbon storage and sequestration, and providing improved flood storage capacity and river flow management.
- **More sustainable agriculture and woodland management practices have delivered provisioning services** (e.g. food, timber). This has been achieved by contributing to an increase in the proportion of land under Environmental Stewardship and the proportion of woodland in active management (note these outcomes cannot be solely attributed to the work of NIA partnerships):
  - land under Environmental Stewardship has **increased by 10.3% across all the NIAs, compared to 7.8% across the whole of England over the period 2012 to 2014;** and
  - the proportion of woodlands in active management in the seven NIA partnerships that reported it has **increased by 3% over the period 2012 to 2014.** Over the same period the national (England) indicator for woodland in active management shows an increase in the percentage of woodland in active management of 2%.

## Evaluation of social and economic wellbeing outcomes and impacts

At the end of Year 2 the key messages from the evaluation of outcomes and impacts for social and economic wellbeing include:

- **The NIA partnerships are making progress: 50% of relevant funding agreement objectives were assessed as being on, or ahead of schedule;** the remaining 50% were behind schedule but there has been ‘satisfactory or good’ progress.

- **In all NIAs, NIA partnership activities are resulting in social, economic and wellbeing benefits.** It was not possible to provide a detailed assessment of their scale or social distribution.
- For most NIA partnerships, **social and economic wellbeing benefits are considered welcome additions to the NIA partnerships' work restoring and creating habitats.** There are likely to be under-reported benefits.
- All the NIA partnerships are **designing and delivering activities that will result in education and learning opportunities for children and for adults.**
- **Community engagement activities have led to the development of new social networks, or the strengthening of existing ones,** mostly as a benefit of volunteering.
- The NIA partnership activities that are delivering **spiritual, cultural and aesthetic** benefits include enhancing a sense of place and artistic enhancements / representations of local places.
- **Six NIA partnerships reported economic benefits,** for example through promoting bio-fuel markets.

## Evaluation of Inputs and Process

At the end of Year 2 the key messages from the evaluation of inputs and processes include:

- **The NIA partnerships are generally on track in terms of delivery: 83% of relevant objectives in their funding agreements were assessed as being on, or ahead of schedule;** the remaining 17% were behind schedule but there has been 'satisfactory or good' progress.
- The NIA partnerships have generated added value<sup>11</sup>: the original NIA government grant over the first two years was just over £4.5 million. Over the same period NIA partnerships have reported a **total added value of £15.7 million.** The ratio of added value to the grant funding is approximately 3.5, i.e. across the NIA partnerships on average **£3.50 of additional value** of which £2.26 was from non-public sources **was generated for each £1.00 of the original NIA government grant from Defra and Natural England.**
- The **largest contribution to added value came from NGOs / non-profit organisations (50% - £7.8 million). Public sector organisations (national and local) have contributed a combined total of £5.6 million (36%), while the private sector has contributed £732,090 (4%).** The remaining contribution came from financial value of the time given by volunteers (9%) and the academic sector (1%).
- The number of staff employed directly by NIA partnerships is relatively small<sup>12</sup>. **Staff time and help in-kind made up 30% of total added value (equivalent to £4.7million).**
- Of the **total amount of volunteering reported to the end of Year 2 (24,326 days), 88% (21,371 days) was under the general unskilled labour category,** 8% (1,921 days) was specialist skilled trained labour and 2% was specialist services and professional volunteering (approximately 500 days in each category).
- Based on interviews with the NIA partnerships, **the partnerships were assessed as functioning well,** with clear organisational and management structures in place, working and steering groups established and effectively managing challenges that have arisen.
- Key benefits of partnership working reported by the NIA partnerships include: **working towards consistent priorities across organisations that may not have coordinated activities**

<sup>11</sup> Added value is defined here as any additional financial support over and above that provided by Defra and Natural England in the initial NIA scheme grant, and is based on financial information supplied by Natural England. It is likely that some of the financial support included as 'added value' will come from other public sector initiatives, including from within the Defra family.

<sup>12</sup> However most NIA partnerships have reported only on direct employment and thus these data do not consistently include contractors, sub-contractors or consultants.

**before; sharing of data and knowledge; and the ability to reach-out to and involve local communities.**

- Based on interviews with the NIA partnerships, they have reported **on the overall benefit of the process of monitoring and evaluation**, despite some of the challenges.
- **There is evidence of research activity and innovation** across all the NIA partnerships, often in partnership with local universities, including on ecosystem services and practical habitat restoration or creation and/or land-management techniques.
- Across the NIAs there are ambitions to **continue the partnerships and to deliver outcomes after the end of the NIA funding period**. The NIA partnerships are all engaged in planning and discussions regarding sources of funding and delivery after 2015.

## Conclusions

This report provides a preliminary evaluation of the NIA programme and progress at end of the second of the three year funded period. The key conclusions that are emerging are:

### Progress against the NIA partnerships' objectives

- The NIA partnerships have made 'good' or 'satisfactory' progress against their funding agreement milestones. At the end of the three year grant period the evaluation will analyse the NIA partnership' Progress Reports and other sources to review delivery against their objectives.
- There has been some variation in progress across the objectives when categorised under the M&E framework themes/sub-themes. At the end of the three year grant period, the evaluation will consider whether progress under these themes/sub-themes is more closely aligned to the original expectations.

### Key cumulative progress and achievements

- The NIA partnerships' have delivered activities across all four main topics linked to their overall objectives: more, bigger, better and less fragmented places for wildlife; enhancing the benefits that nature provides for people; uniting local communities, land managers and businesses; and places of inspiration and innovation.
- The NIA partnerships' progress and achievements are also making a contribution to the Biodiversity 2020 outcomes. At the end of the three year grant period, the evaluation report on the contribution made.
- The NIA partnerships are all very different and have locally specific objectives and work programmes. This means that comparative and cumulative reporting is not always appropriate or possible. Where data is available, the Year 2 evaluation has indicated the scale of cumulative progress across common measures – for example at the end of Year 2 approximately 10% of the total area of priority habitat across all NIAs has been subject to NIA partnership activity under the NIA programme.
- Many of the NIA partnerships' activities will result in impacts that will only be fully realised in the long-term. It is a challenge for both existing monitoring systems and those developed specifically for the NIA programme to provide a direct measure of their outcomes and impacts during the three year funding period. The lessons from the NIA M&E Phase 2 project and dialogue between the NIA partnerships, Defra and Natural England will be used in considering the long term maintenance and uses of the M&E framework and online reporting tool.

### Evaluation of the outcomes and impacts across the M&E framework themes and the extent to which any change can be attributed to NIA partnerships' activities

- The Year 2 Progress Report shows outcomes emerging across the biodiversity, ecosystem services and social and economic wellbeing themes. It is generally not yet possible to evaluate impacts due to time lags between action and impact. There are also some challenges to aggregating data across NIAs; and in determining the extent to which NIA partnership activity itself has contributed to improvements or changes.
- In Year 3 the evaluation team will be undertaking additional work to help determine whether some or all of the outcomes might have taken place in the absence of the NIA partnerships and the added value that the NIA partnerships have provided. This will use three agreed approaches: a counterfactual scenario based approach, will focus on gathering a range of insights from practitioners and stakeholders into what would have happened without the NIAs; an approach based on NIA data to determine trajectories both before and after the NIAs were established, and an approach based on a comparison of the NIAs with similar non-NIA areas or landscapes.
- The NIA partnerships have engaged in activities to test innovative approaches, research and share knowledge, including in developing and measuring habitat connectivity or ecosystem services. All the NIA partnerships are developing knowledge or skills in these rapidly developing areas and they are forging links with universities and research institutions that should provide long term benefits. This knowledge and skills will be valuable for the future work of the NIA partnerships, and lessons will be useful to share amongst both the initial 12 NIA partnerships and in the longer term with any new NIAs.
- All of the initial NIA partnerships are involved in activities that are resulting in social, economic and wellbeing benefits. The qualitative data from the interviews and case studies that have been undertaken in Year 2 have helped to identify emerging outcomes for social and economic wellbeing.
- At the end of Year 2, the evidence shows that all NIA partnerships are working well and have been effective mechanisms for coordinating activities, sharing data and knowledge and helping to reach-out to and involve local communities. This provides some lessons for any future application of the approach by locally determined NIAs, as well as for other similar partnerships. The evaluation at the end of the three year grant period will consider the likely long-term benefits of the NIA programme and the NIA partnerships' plans for continuing their work to fund and deliver their visions to 2020.
- The benefits of the structured monitoring and evaluation framework reported, by the NIA partnerships, included: using the results of the M&E process to communicate change and achievements, as an input into decision-making; sharing data amongst partners and other organisations; and learning monitoring skills from other partners and building capacity, including within the local community. Challenges have occurred, such as the availability and processing of certain national datasets and some data collection and recording by partners, but generally the M&E process has been seen as beneficial by the NIA partnerships and has been more efficient in Year 2 than in Year 1.

### Next steps

The end of the third year reporting period for the NIA partnerships coincides with the end of the three year grant funding period at the end of March 2015. The final reporting deadline for the M&E Phase 2 project is November 2015. The proposed timings for the activities are:

- **Online reporting tool** available for Year 3 reporting by the NIA partnerships from the end of November 2014.
- NIA partnerships to commence Year 3 **data entry** - November 2014.

- M&E Phase 2 project contractors proceed with **counterfactual work** during last quarter of 2014 and first quarter of 2015.
- A Year 3 **M&E workshop** to discuss reporting and reflective consideration of the NIA partnerships work will potentially be held in early 2015.
- NIA **Best Practice event** on habitat connectivity likely to be held in February 2015.
- End of Year 3 **reporting period** 31 March 2015.
- Some **national data** (e.g. BARs bulk upload, Environmental Stewardship) likely to be supplied after March 2015 – Natural England and M&E Phase 2 project contractors to agree approach to data entry and verifying analysis if some NIA partnerships are not available to undertake these tasks.
- Depending on NIA partnerships availability post March 2015 to review / validate Year 3 reporting, possibly invite interested NIA partnerships to form a small **review group** for this purpose.
- Year 3 **data analysis and validation / quality assurance** - ongoing February – June 2015.
- Drafting of and feedback on **overall NIA evaluation report** and other deliverables – June–October 2015.
- **Final overall NIA evaluation report** and other project deliverables - November 2015.