



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs



Defra project code: WC 1061

Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Year 1 (2012-13) Progress Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

September
2013

Collingwood
Environmental
Planning Limited

in partnership with
GeoData Institute and
Cascade Consulting



Collingwood
Environmental
Planning



Project title:	Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Phase 2
Contracting organisation:	The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)
Defra project code:	WC 1061
Lead contractor:	Collingwood Environmental Planning Limited Address: 1E The Chandlery, 50 Westminster Bridge Road, London, SE1 7QY, UK Contacts: Ric Eales (Project Director) r.eales@cep.co.uk Owen White (Project Manager) o.white@cep.co.uk Tel. 020 7407 8700 Website: www.cep.co.uk
Partner organisations:	GeoData Institute: Contact: Chris Hill Email: cth@geodata.soton.ac.uk Cascade Consulting: Contact: Dave Corbelli Email: david.corbelli@cascadeconsulting.co.uk
Report details:	Report title: Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Year 1 (2012-13) Progress Report – executive summary only Work Package: WP4: Undertaking analysis and evaluation Date issued: 16 th September 2013 Purpose: Sets out the findings of the evaluation of the NIAs after Year 1 (2012 – 2013). Version: FINAL Author(s): Ric Eales, Owen White, Jonathan Baker, Clare Twigger-Ross, Paula Orr and Steven Forrest (all CEP); Teresa Bennett and Bruce Horton (both CEP Associates); and Chris Hill (GeoData Institute). Citation: Collingwood Environmental Planning (2013) <i>Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Year 1 (2012-13) Progress Report</i> . Collingwood Environmental Planning Ltd, London.
Acknowledgements:	This report has been prepared for Defra and Natural England by Collingwood Environmental Planning (CEP) with support from the GeoData Institute. The preparation of the report was managed by Andy Stott (Defra), Brian McDonald (Natural England) and Helen Pontier (Defra), with particular support from Rebecca Jackson Pitt and Judith Milne (both Natural England), as well as guidance from the rest of the NIA M&E Phase 2 Steering Group including: Sarah Webster (Defra), James Vause (Defra), Simon Maxwell (Defra), Oli Grafton (Natural England), Nick Brodin (Natural England), Heather Ball (Nene Valley NIA and the Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire), Aiden Lonergan (RSPB), Daniel Hayhow (RSPB) and Professor John Rodwell (Independent Ecologist). In addition, all the NIAs have contributed information and their time to assist in the preparation of this Year 1 (2012-13) Progress Report.
Photograph Credits:	Cover photograph: Devon Wildlife Trust (Tarka Trail event, alongside the River Torridge - local school children working with a storyteller to develop their own stories of the river and the local environment. October 2012).

Contents

Foreword	iii
Executive Summary	1
Introduction	1
Key findings from the monitoring and evaluation of NIAs in Year 1	2
Overview of NIA achievements in Year 1	6
The resources invested in the NIAs in Year 1	8
The processes and activities undertaken by the NIAs in Year 1	9
The contribution to biodiversity outputs, outcomes and impacts by the NIAs in Year 1	10
The contribution to ecosystem services outputs, outcomes and impacts by the NIAs in Year 1	12
The contribution to social and economic outputs, outcomes and impacts by the NIAs in Year 1	12
The contribution to partnership working outputs, outcomes and impacts by the NIAs in Year 1	13
Next steps	14

Abbreviations

BARS	Biodiversity Action Reporting System	LNP	Local Nature Partnership
CEP	Collingwood Environmental Planning Ltd	M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
Defra	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	NEWP	Natural Environment White Paper
ha	Hectare	NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
km	kilometre	NIA	Nature Improvement Area

Foreword

Over the last year I've been fortunate to visit seven of the twelve NIAs. I'm not trying to avoid the other five – I have been invited to visit, but fitting it in my diary proved to be impossible. By the way, in the year covered by this report I've also given 21 presentations about NIAs (one every two weeks) all over the country both to NIAs themselves, and also to a wide range of other organisations. Interest in NIAs is intense, and (if my diary is anything to go by) shows no sign of diminishing. So monitoring progress and evaluating outcomes are vital.

I no longer have any official position in the system, but somehow I see NIAs as my baby, and watching progress brings a vicarious sense of pleasure. One of the things that struck me forcefully when I have been visiting is the huge amount of enthusiasm, collaboration and vision in every consortium. Yes, I know it's a lot of work, and I know there have been, and still are problems, but nothing that is worth-while, and certainly nothing that is pioneering is ever easy! And in the middle of the day-to-day problems and frustrations it's often hard to realise that you are making progress. But you are. Real progress. I'm amazed by how much has been achieved already, as this report makes abundantly clear. I always knew that making more space for nature in the NIAs would take time – certainly longer than the three years allocated when we set off on this journey. But looking at what has been achieved in this first year, I think we will all be pleasantly surprised by where we are by 2015.

Keep up the good work, and thank you!

Professor Sir John Lawton CBE FRS

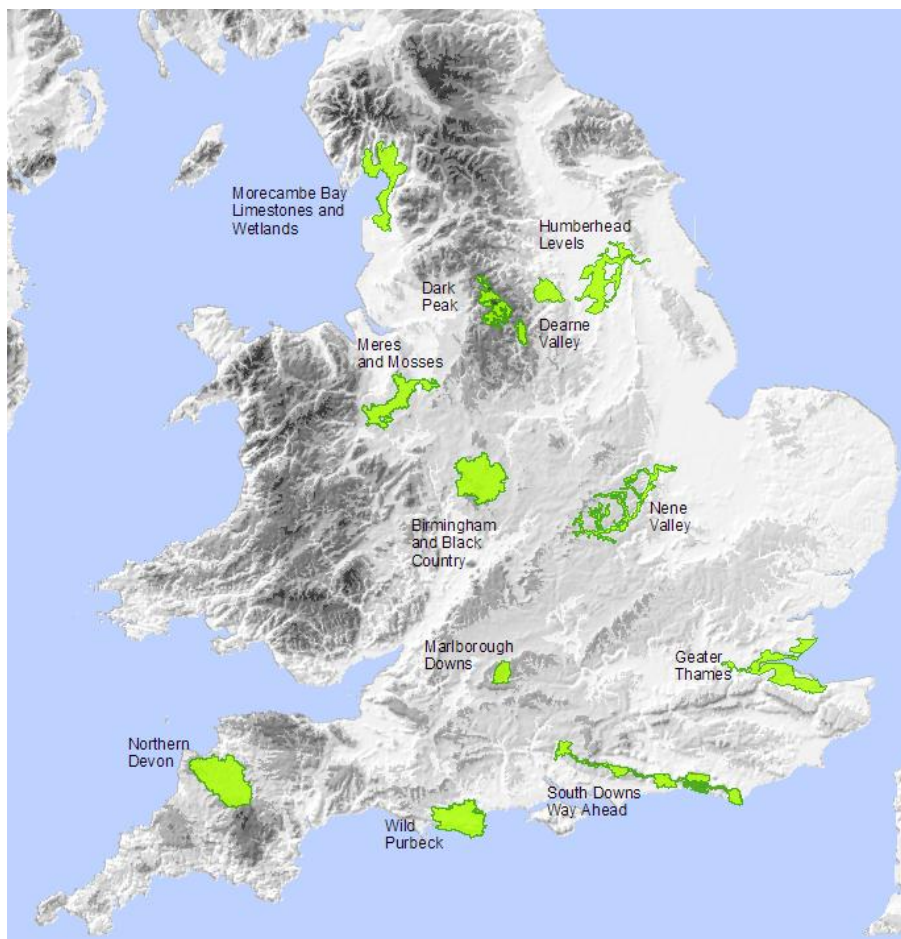
York, July 2013

Executive Summary

Introduction

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, landowners and business through a shared vision. They will try out different approaches, and the variety of objectives, issues and partnerships seen across the NIAs is part of this purpose. Nevertheless a consistent approach for monitoring and evaluation is necessary to be able to assess what works well, and potentially not so well, and to take stock overall. The NIAs are applying several concepts where the practical use of science is still contested and/or developing, for example relating to restoration of habitat connectivity and ecosystem services. Implementation of such new and largely untested approaches poses significant challenges. This innovative, experimental and developmental context needs to be borne in mind when considering the results of this evaluation of the first year of progress in NIAs.

Figure 1: Location of Nature Improvement Areas



Source: Natural England 2013, STRM hill-shaded relief

As part of the NIA programme, the 12 initial NIAs are required to undertake monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of their projects. A monitoring and evaluation framework including indicators under four themes (Biodiversity, Ecosystem Services, Social and Economic Benefits and Contributions to Well-Being, and Partnership Working) was developed in a Phase 1 project commissioned by Defra. The framework aims to provide a useful tool for the NIAs to measure the progress of their delivery within and beyond the three year programme. Some of the indicators are 'core' indicators that must be adopted by all the NIAs, while the others are optional. The Phase 1

project also included the development of an online tool to aid the capture and reporting of monitoring information and data collected by all of the 12 initial NIAs and in future other locally determined NIAs. The 12 initial NIAs must also submit quarterly progress reports and annual financial reporting to Natural England.

In March 2013, Defra in collaboration with Natural England commissioned Collingwood Environmental Planning (CEP), with its partners GeoData Institute and Cascade Consulting, to undertake a Phase 2 monitoring and evaluation project to build on the work completed during Phase 1. The Phase 2 project is undertaking further technical development of indicators and reporting tools, providing support for NIA partnerships, enabling co-ordination and knowledge exchange with other related initiatives and undertaking an evaluation of the NIAs after 1, 2 and 3 years. This Year 1 (2012-13) Progress Report presents the results of the evaluation of the NIAs at the end of their first year of activity.

Key findings from the monitoring and evaluation of NIAs in Year 1

From the monitoring and evaluation of NIAs set out in this Year 1 (2012-13) Progress Report, the following key findings have been identified:

- 1. NIA management and organisation:** In Year 1, all of the NIAs have established clear management structures and partnerships (many of which are based on pre-existing partnership arrangements), prepared clear plans for the three year programme and have started to implement projects to deliver against their objectives. They have however also faced some challenges, which have included: the scale of the resourcing required for effective NIA management and delivery; the costs, time and effort required to recruit appropriate staff; and staff resources to deliver expected project activities.
- 2. Input of financial and human resources to the NIAs:** The NIAs have mobilised significant financial and human resources in Year 1. They have attracted significant value added¹ over-and-above the grants awarded by Defra and Natural England: each £1 invested by government resulted in £5.50 in additional support. When planned support is taken into account, each £1 invested by government should result in nearly £6.80 in additional support.
- 3. Development of the NIA partnerships:** A wide variety of types of partners are involved in working together towards a shared vision for each NIA. This includes representation from the private sector, academia, NGOs, the government arms-length bodies (e.g. Environment Agency, Forestry Commission) and land managers. In Year 2 the evaluation will need to investigate in more detail how the partnerships are working in practice and if they are added value compared with other approaches to delivering landscape scale conservation.

“The coordinator has been working with four volunteer groups training and hosting approximately 30 local volunteers engaged in practical habitat management, heritage restoration and livestock looking” (South Downs Way Ahead NIA)

¹ Added value is defined here as any additional financial support over and above that provided by Defra 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. A more detailed analysis of these data will be completed in Year 2 of the evaluation.

4. Engagement with local communities by the NIAs:

NIAs are engaging with people, including local communities and volunteers. Five NIAs have reported work with local schools, two NIAs have involved volunteers in surveys and all the NIAs have reporting working with volunteers in delivering other activities such as local cultural



Steining Coombe Scrub clearance, South Downs NIA (Steining Grammar School, 2012)

events linked to the natural environment. The number of volunteers involved in some NIAs is very high, with three NIAs recording more than 1,000 days of volunteering in the first year. Some NIAs have also provided training for volunteers, to build their capacity. There are also examples of activities in Year 1 providing a wide range of other social and cultural benefits.

- 5. Delivery of 'on the ground' outcomes by the NIAs:** The NIAs have already delivered 'on the ground' improvements in Year 1. By way of examples recorded by NIAs in their quarterly Progress Reporting and Year 1 progress summaries this includes: over 6.5ha of new woodland planted² in Birmingham and Black Country; approximately 350ha of habitat restored through agri-environment schemes in Northern Devon (with the NIA supporting through advisory site visits with landowners and helping with grants and capital works); creation or restoration of three dew ponds and the construction of five tree sparrow nesting sites in Marlborough Downs; and major access routes for visitors restored in The Dark Peak NIA with the help of volunteers.

"We're ... running projects which are explicitly working to target as yet unreached community groups and volunteers" (Birmingham and Black Country NIA)

6. Progress against the NIAs own objectives: The NIAs have self-reported on their progress in Year 1 and all report that they have made 'good' or 'satisfactory' progress against targets

under their own objectives. Five have reported that delivery is in line with planned milestones, while seven have reported that some elements of delivery is behind schedule in relation to one or more objectives. The most frequently cited reasons for delays to projects were the time taken for project staff to be appointed and to then get up to speed with the work and the wet weather conditions (rain and floods) during the year which had an impact on the work of farmers and land managers. The evaluation of self-reported progress is not intended to be comparative, as each NIA will have set milestones according to their own planning priorities and expectations, and some may have been more achievable than others.

² Based on self-reported achievements in Birmingham and Black Country NIA quarterly Progress Reports, specifically: 4.59ha of new 'community woodland' created in Walsall at the proposed Walsall Country Park site; 1.97ha mixed broadleaved woodland with shrub layer planted at Bleak Hill.

7. Delivery of biodiversity outputs and outcomes: Many of the NIAs have been engaged in activities during Year 1 which have led to biodiversity outputs and outcomes across the habitat, species and ecological connectivity sub-themes within the monitoring and evaluation framework. Typical activities include: habitat restoration, creation and enhancement for a variety of habitats; activities to improve the status of key species or species groups, such as bats, bees and farmland birds; and improvements to ecological networks through creation and restoration of habitats, buffers, corridors for both terrestrial and aquatic wildlife.

8. Delivery across all the monitoring and evaluation framework themes and wider policy objectives: The NIAs have undertaken activities across all four of the themes (i.e. Biodiversity, Ecosystem Services, Social and Economic Benefits and Contributions to Well-Being, and Partnership Working) during Year 1 and these have contributed to wider policy objectives, including ambitions set out in the *Biodiversity 2020 strategy*³. In Years 2 and 3 the evaluation will investigate the nature and significance of these contributions in more detail.

9. Evidence of NIAs working together and sharing learning: There is some evidence that the NIAs are working together and sharing learning. Examples include: the two NIA best practice events



Volunteers surveying Culm grassland, Northern Devon NIA (Devon Wildlife Trust, 2013)

“The Eastern Moors Partnership has restored the Moss Road, reversing the drastic erosion that has occurred on this access route over the last few years. This work was carried out with extensive consultation with the key stakeholders and users, so that the newly designed route would meet their requirements. These stakeholders and users then formed work parties to carry out a large proportion of the work themselves ... the success of this meant that NIA money was available to restore an adjoining bridleway”. (Dark Peak NIA)

that were held in the first year (focussing on Making Space for Grasslands at the Landscape Scale and Planning Policy and Land Use); discussions on the NIA workspace on Huddle – an online resource which includes a discussion forum, bulletin boards, calendar and document library; and opportunities to share experience provided by events such as the NIA Forum in March 2013. Several of NIAs are also working with local universities and research organisations, with research being used to develop an understanding of innovative approaches to natural

environment project delivery and assessment. Ecosystem services are a focus of research in at least four NIAs.

³ Defra (2011) *Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England’s wildlife and ecosystem services*.

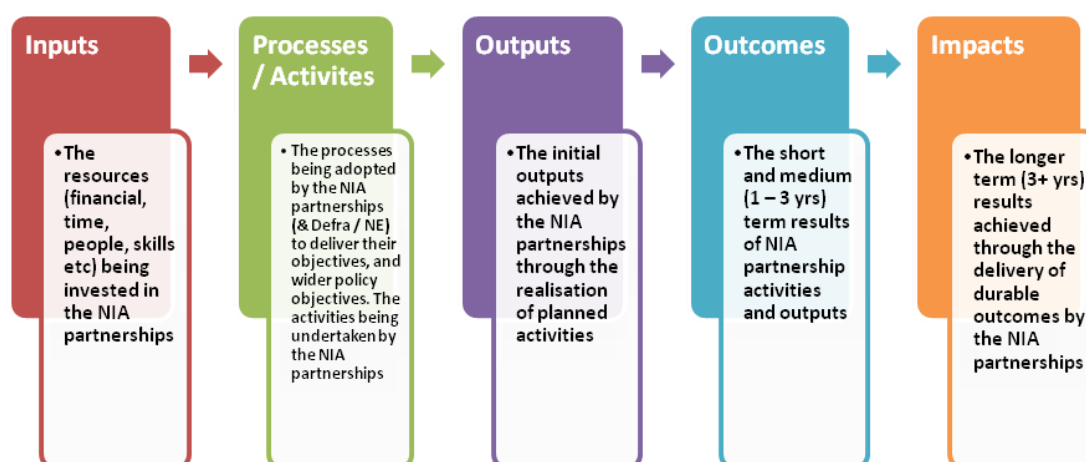
10. Implementation of the monitoring and evaluation framework by the NIAs: The 12 NIAs have all reported on progress using the online reporting tool and indicators selected from the framework, including both core and optional indicators. NIAs have chosen to use between 14 and 28 indicators each, and in the first year each NIA has entered at least some data against 13 indicators on average. It is noted however that the indicators and protocols in several areas, such as habitat connectivity, ecosystem services and social and economic benefits and wellbeing, are still under development and that further definition and refinement will be necessary over the next year to enable outcomes and impacts of the NIAs to be fully evaluated. As far as is possible this will draw on and share approaches already being developed within some NIAs. In addition, the online reporting tool requires some further developments and refinements to address the difficulties many of the NIAs have experienced in using it for the first time in Year 1.

Purpose of the evaluation and overview of approach

The Year 1 (2012-13) Progress Report provides an overview of the progress of the NIAs during their first year of operation since they were established in April 2012. It aims to provide an early indication of whether the NIAs individually and collectively are on the right trajectory to meet their objectives. This first year Progress Report particularly focuses on establishing and testing the approach to the monitoring and evaluation and the potential data that will be used to support it – given this is first year of the NIAs, the focus is inevitably on assessing the inputs to the NIAs and processes and activities they have been involved in rather than outcomes and impacts at this stage. It should be noted however that in Year 1 there have been some challenges in establishing the baseline situation, or starting position prior to the NIAs, and in undertaking comparative analysis to fully understand what difference the NIAs have made compared with where NIAs do not exist. The approach to monitoring and evaluation also reflects the innovative nature of the NIA initiative and the need to develop new approaches in several areas (e.g. habitat connectivity, ecosystem services and social and economic benefits and wellbeing).

The evaluation method uses a logic model which links the intended outcomes (both short term and longer term impacts) with the policy inputs, activities and processes. Within the logic model, evaluation objectives, sub-objectives and criteria have been structured under the four themes of the NIA M&E framework⁴ namely: Biodiversity; Ecosystem Services; Social and Economic Benefits and Contributions to Wellbeing; and, Partnership Working. Evaluation questions have been developed around each criterion, as a basis for the evaluation of: individual NIAs; and the NIAs collectively at the programme level.

Figure 2: The Logic Model for NIAs



⁴ See: <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/conservation/biodiversity/funding/nia/monitoringandevaluation.aspx>

The online reporting tool provides a structured data-entry tool for the recording, storing, reporting and sharing of data and information relating to NIA partnership activities and outputs. The online reporting tool is structured to reflect the M&E framework and associated indicators and is designed to enable the NIA partnerships to record each year their achievements relating to each indicator. The tool is also intended to complement rather than duplicate other systems of data recording, such as BARS (the Biodiversity Action Reporting System). The online reporting tool has been used for the first time to inform the Year 1 evaluation and whilst further planned developments and refinements are required, it has provided one of the main sources of information for the evaluation in the first year. Other sources drawn on by the evaluation include: NIA Business Plans and Funding Agreements; Quarterly NIA Progress Reports; each NIA's Year 1 annual summary Progress Report and annual financial reporting; as well as Natural England's synthesis and analysis for certain indicators.

Overview of NIA achievements in Year 1

All of the NIAs have been successful in delivering practical initiatives in Year 1, noting that activities in some areas, such as maintaining and restoring ecosystem services and improving habitat connectivity, are intended from the outset to be innovative and to explore and test approaches over the three years of the NIA initiative. Much initial activity within the NIAs has been focussed on establishing project teams (especially recruitment of key staff), finalisation of partner responsibilities, the securing of additional funds and the planning of projects in line with Business Plans. However, as the table below shows there has also been project activity and delivery across all themes. Note that all figures included in the table below are drawn from NIA quarterly Progress Reports (particularly the 4th quarter) and Year 1 Progress Reports. These figures therefore reflect the level of delivery as reported by NIAs for the period 1st January 2012 – 30th March 2013.

Self-assessment of progress by the NIAs indicates that: all have made 'good' or 'satisfactory' progress against their targets; five have reported that delivery is in line with planned milestones; while seven have reported that some elements of delivery is behind schedule in relation to one or more objectives.

Table 1: Examples of NIA activities delivered in Year 1

Themes	Examples of NIA delivery by sub-theme
Biodiversity	Habitat <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over 6.5ha of new woodland created within the Birmingham and Black Country NIA. New saline lagoon created within the Wild Purbeck NIA. Around 350ha of habitat restored through agri-environment schemes (with the NIA supporting through advisory site visits with landowners and helping with grants and capital works) and through use of machinery and grazing rings in Northern Devon NIA. Blanket bog restoration works undertaken within Dark Peak NIA. 21.5ha woodland, 51.8ha grassland, 6.5ha of heathland and two geological sites enhanced within the Birmingham and Black Country NIA. Condition of watercourses improved by preventing pollution by contaminants within the Dearne Valley. Scrub clearance undertaken at Crowle and Hatfield Moors in the Humberhead Levels NIA.
	Species <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Variety of actions for a range of species within Marlborough Downs NIA, including providing food and nest sites for farmland birds, including planting five new tree sparrow 'villages' and putting up 70 tree sparrow nestboxes and putting up five new kestrel boxes and one new barn owl box. Research being undertaken into seed priming protocols for chalk grassland species restoration for the South Downs NIA. Works undertaken across a network of sites for bumblebee species in Greater Thames Marshes NIA.
	Connectivity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 19.5km wildlife corridor, including watercourses, hedgerows and boundary features, enhanced within the Birmingham and Black Country NIA. Over 1,500ha of land to be incorporated within Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreements to strengthen the ecological network in the Nene Valley NIA.

Themes	Examples of NIA delivery by sub-theme
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interactive on-line atlas produced that takes account of existing biodiversity, land uses and anticipated pressures for change to help delivery of an ecological network in Greater Thames Marshes NIA.
	Invasive species <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rhododendron control undertaken within the Meres and Mosses NIA. Bracken and Rhododendron control undertaken to restore moorlands and woodlands in Dark Peak NIA.
Ecosystem Services	Cultural services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools visited the RSPB Old Moor in the Dearne Valley and a range of working with schools initiatives developed. Major access routes for visitors restored in Dark Peak NIA with the help of volunteers enabling additional works to nearby routes. School groups visited the River Torridge with a storyteller, saw the Giants in the Forest art installation and wrote their own stories of the river and its environment in Northern Devon NIA.
	Supporting services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital maps produced showing density of bees and other pollinators across the Nene Valley NIA. Training delivered on resource protection and soil management in Northern Devon NIA.
	Regulating services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training delivered the Woodland Carbon Code for application within Northern Devon NIA.
	Provisioning services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two sustainable woodfuel projects initiated and volunteers registered for a 'woodshare' scheme and seven tonnes of wood cut for conservation management moved to a 'wood bank' in Morecambe Bay NIA.
Social & economic benefits & contributions to wellbeing	Social impacts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The CONNECT Project within the Humberhead Levels NIA has resulted in more than 2,500 additional visitors to Gateway Sites and over 5,000 hours of volunteer time. A big volunteer day held at Arnside in Morecambe Bay NIA engaged around 80 volunteers, including school children, in practical tasks.
	Wellbeing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working with local Rights of Way officers to identify a four mile long circular route for people to enjoy the Downs and view project activities of the Marlborough Downs NIA. Walking resources in development in the Meres and Mosses NIA.
	Economic values and impacts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Production of seven different types of biomass fuel products from harvested reed and removal of trees and scrub under investigation and trial by the Humberhead Levels NIA. Nature tourism business network launched in the Morecambe Bay NIA. Breeding flock of Shetland ewes and herds of Dexters and British White cattle acquired and deployed at sites within the South Downs NIA. Work started for a South Downs Way Visitor Payback Scheme. Investigations underway to identify the quantity and usability of scrub arising from heathland management works in Wild Purbeck NIA.
Partnership working	Mobilisation of resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Just under £2.1 million secured from the Catchment Restoration Fund for water quality improvements and £92,000 from SITA for blanket bog restoration within Dark Peak NIA. £0.5 million secured from the Coastal Communities Fund for a Morecambe Bay sustainable tourism project.
	Efficient and effective delivery <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Links developed with nearby landscape project groups by the South Downs NIA to maximise outcomes and achieve efficiencies in delivery through combined effort. Partners in the Wild Purbeck NIA are working with the Frome Piddle Catchment Management Plan, particularly on woodland planting and wetland restoration to achieve joint outcomes.
	Leadership and influence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NIA Best Practice events on grasslands hosted by Northern Devon NIA and planning hosted by the Dearne Valley NIA. The Biodiversity Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPD) for North Northamptonshire has been amended to include the Nene Valley NIA. Branding and communications exercise completed and work being undertaken with local universities and agricultural colleges within the Meres and Mosses NIA. Website developed for Greater Thames Marshes NIA.

Source: selected information and data from NIA quarterly Progress Report and NIA Year 1 summary Progress Reports.

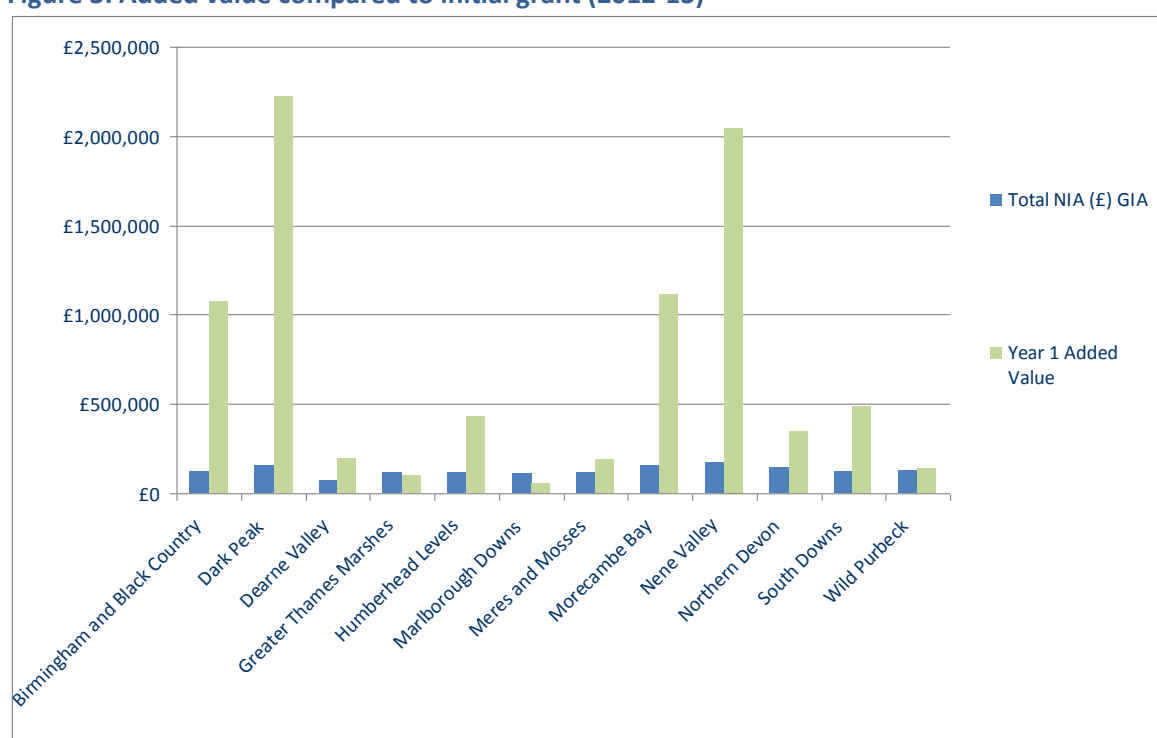
The resources invested in the NIAs in Year 1

This part of the evaluation considered the scale and type of resources invested by each NIA in Year 1 and how these resources have been used. Governance arrangements at the outset of each NIA project were also considered as well as existing networks (e.g. of community or volunteering groups) as key input factors to each NIA.

The evaluation in Year 1 shows that significant financial resources have been expended by the NIA's and that they have attracted significant value added⁵: in total, each £1 invested by government resulted in £5.50 in additional support, and when planned support is also taken into account each £1 invested by government should result in nearly £6.80 in additional support.

While staff costs and running costs represent a large share of expenditure in Year 1 and the effort and cost of recruitment was in some cases higher than expected, a number of NIAs have already invested significant amounts in implementing projects 'on the ground'. Volunteers are also being widely used and large amounts of volunteer time has been mobilised in Year 1 e.g. Nene Valley (approximately 3,300 days), Humberhead Levels and Morecambe Bay (both more than 1,300 days).

Figure 3: Added value compared to initial grant (2012-13)



Source: analysis based on Year 1 financial summary of spend spreadsheet, collated by Natural England based on NIA financial claims

Most of the NIA partnerships developed from existing partnerships: 10 of the 12 NIA partnerships can be considered to have existed prior to the NIA initiative.

⁵ Value added is defined here as any additional financial support over and above that provided by Defra 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 'value added' will come from other public sector initiatives, including from within the Defra family. A more detailed analysis of these data will be completed in Year 2.

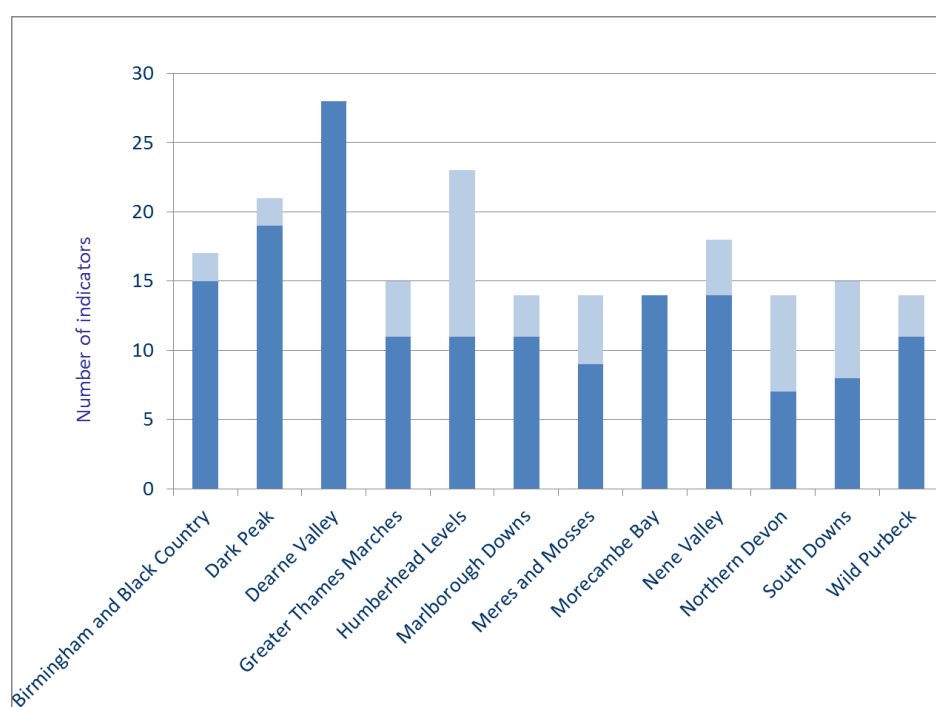
The processes and activities undertaken by the NIAs in Year 1

This part of the evaluation considered the processes and activities adopted by the NIAs to deliver their own objectives and the wider policy objectives of the NIA initiative.

The evaluation in Year 1 shows all NIAs met the requirement to deliver regular Progress Reports of delivery against their Business Plans. While monitoring and evaluation was challenging in Year 1, the majority of NIAs successfully reported on more than half of their selected indicators (noting that a number of indicators were not expected to be reported in Year 1) - there are 43 indicators available for NIAs to select from, of which a minimum of 13 are required and five are core that all NIAs must report on. Collectively the 12 NIAs identified more than 200 different measures relating to the core and optional indicators, covering all four themes of the NIA M&E framework. Some data was recorded against 75% of these indicators in Year 1 using the online reporting tool. Any issues raised during Year 1 by the NIAs relating to problems they encountered in using the online reporting tool or the indicator protocols have been logged by the Phase 2 contractors and will provide an important input to project work in these areas in Year 2.

The NIA partnerships are very varied in the number (from three to 54) and type of partners involved, and many partnerships are still actively developing with new partners joining or expressing interest in doing so. The Environment Agency, Natural England, and the Forestry Commission are partners in all of the NIAs. A wide range of organisations are involved, including local authorities in all NIAs and private sector organisations in eight NIAs, indicating the diversity of interest in the NIA projects.

Figure 4: Number of indicators selected (dark and light blue) and those completed (dark blue) within Year 1



Source: Analysis based on indicators selected by NIAs on the online reporting tool (reviewed 23/08/13)

The NIAs have already undertaken considerable community engagement activity: working with schools (in five NIAs); undertaking surveys (in two NIAs); and activities such as concerts and sustainable tourism. Volunteers have been involved in numerous NIA activities, and helped deliver NIA projects, while many NIAs have sought to build volunteer capacity by providing training. In addition a number of NIAs are working with local universities and research organisations, with research projects focussed on developing innovative approaches to natural environment project delivery and assessment.

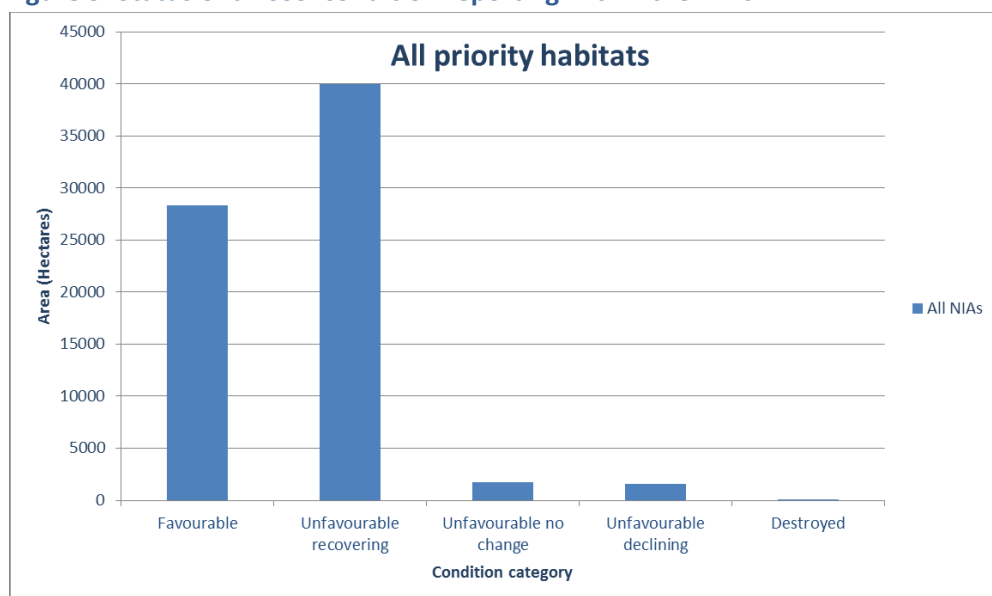
The contribution to biodiversity outputs, outcomes and impacts by the NIAs in Year 1

This part of the evaluation assessed the Year 1 Outputs, Outcomes and Impacts steps in the evaluation logic model under the Biodiversity theme.

The focus of monitoring in Year 1 has been on developing the baseline situation, and limited information was available to enable an evaluation of outcomes and change to be able to determine whether the NIAs are on trajectory to meet their objectives.

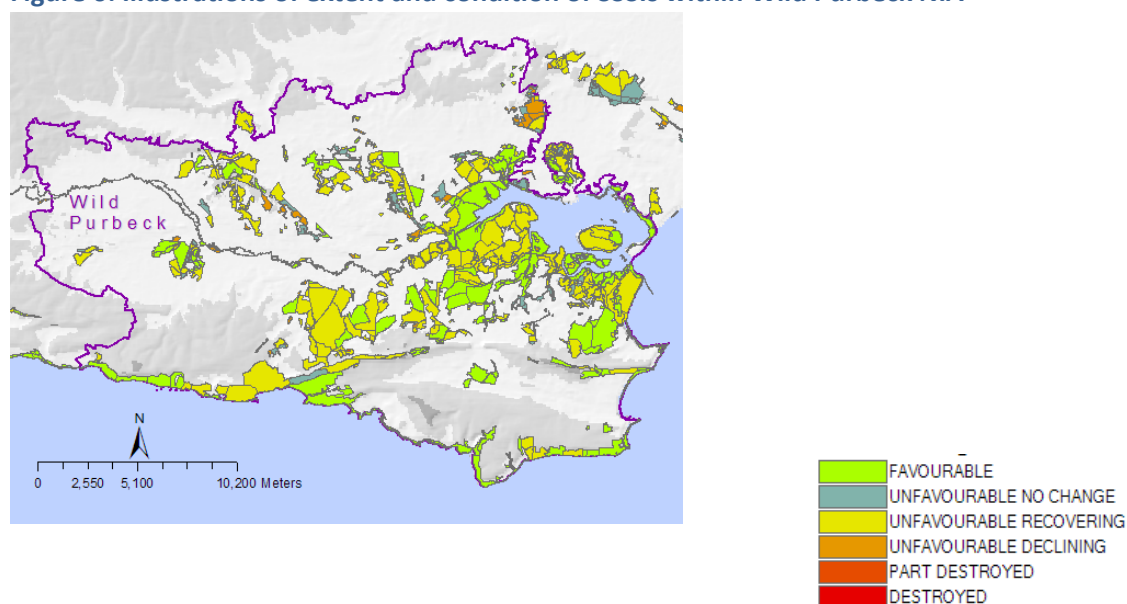
However, many of the NIAs have been engaged in activities during Year 1 which have led to biodiversity outputs and outcomes across the habitat, species and connectivity sub-themes, including activities related to: habitat restoration, creation and enhancement for a variety of habitats; activities to improve the status of key species or species groups, such as bats, bees and farmland birds; and improvements to ecological networks through creation and restoration of habitats, buffers, corridors for both terrestrial and aquatic wildlife.

Figure 5: Status of all SSSI condition reporting within the NIAs



Source: SSSI management unit condition data, derived by Natural England for each NIA

Figure 6: Illustrations of extent and condition of SSSIs within Wild Purbeck NIA



All NIAs have reported on the core indicators and some of the optional indicators for biodiversity within Year 1, but few have had data to measure change against a baseline obtained prior to or at the initiation of the programme. BARS, the Biodiversity Action Reporting System, is being used to collate and report on habitat actions within the NIAs, but wider take-up is needed to provide a more comprehensive picture of the completed actions.

The indicators on widespread and focal species are providing some measure of the response of selected species to conservation actions; in addition, the invasive species indicator has been selected by four NIAs to show actions taken to control non-native species. The baselines for these indicators, the species included and trends are often uncertain at this stage; NIAs have included local surveys to help to provide a more robust baseline and programme for monitoring, but typically these have been delayed in implementation.

Two of the NIAs note specific research collaborations that are supporting the analysis of the species status e.g. Dearne Valley water vole studies and South Downs for skylark and corn bunting. Two NIAs (Nene Valley and Dearne Valley) have mentioned a comprehensive habitat survey being produced at the outset of the project to support future monitoring and planning and connectivity assessments, although other NIAs have been collating habitat information and using volunteers to capture habitat information.



Royal Agricultural University Students putting in a gate to allow better access to the Downs, working with a Wiltshire Council Rights of Way Officer (Marlborough Downs NIA, 2013)

Connectivity of habitat is a central component of the biodiversity objectives addressing the 'more joined up' coherent ecological network described in *Making Space for Nature* (Lawton et al 2007)⁶ and endorsed in the Natural Environment White Paper and the *Biodiversity 2020* strategy. Progress in the uptake of the indicator of habitat connectivity within Year 1 has been limited, with only four of the NIAs generating measures. Further sharing of experience within the NIAs, and development of guidance

is planned within the Phase 2 project.

Under the Biodiversity theme and sub-themes, there is evidence that the NIAs are currently contributing to ambitions set out in *Biodiversity 2020* including Outcome 1 (Habitats and ecosystems on land), Outcome 3 (Species) and Outcome 4 (People), and Themes 1 (A more integrated large-scale approach to conservation on land and at sea) and 3 (Reducing environmental pressures).

⁶ Lawton, J.H., Brotherton, P.N.M., Brown, V.K., Elphick, C., Fitter, A.H., Forshaw, J., Haddow, R.W., Hilborne, S., Leafe, R.N., Mace, G.M., Southgate, M.P., Sutherland, W.J., Tew, T.E., Varley, J., & Wynne, G.R. (2010) *Making Space for Nature: a review of England's wildlife sites and ecological network*. Report to Defra. <http://archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/biodiversity/documents/201009space-for-nature.pdf>

Further developments of the biodiversity indicator protocols will be necessary to facilitate robust monitoring and evaluation in future years.

The contribution to ecosystem services outputs, outcomes and impacts by the NIAs in Year 1

This part of the evaluation assessed the Year 1 Outputs, Outcomes and Impacts steps in the evaluation logic model under the Ecosystem Services theme.

It is noted that all of the NIAs are using the concept of ecosystem services to support the identification and rationale for their projects, however, only some are framing specific projects around ecosystem services and using the language and concept explicitly. This difference is largely semantic. Those projects that are targeted at increasing the provision of specific services are fairly evenly distributed across provisioning, regulating and cultural services. There are limited examples of NIAs focussing on enhancement of supporting services.

It is acknowledged that indicators and protocols under the Ecosystem Services theme require further development to enable outcomes and impacts of the NIAs on ecosystem services to be robustly evaluated, and as such this is included as a work stream within the NIA M&E Phase 2 project. However, lessons can be learnt from several of the NIAs that have already started developing their approaches to measuring ecosystem services.



Morecambe Bay woodfuel project: demonstration event for low impact machinery, Dobshall Wood (Arnsdale & Silverdale AONB, 2013)



Building a bug hotel, Brogdale Farm, Faversham. Greater Thames Marshes NIA (Stef Lawrence, 2013)

The contribution to social and economic outputs, outcomes and impacts by the NIAs in Year 1

This part of the evaluation assessed the Year 1 Outputs, Outcomes and Impacts steps in the evaluation logic model under the Social and Economic Benefits and Wellbeing theme.

It is acknowledged that indicators and protocols in this theme require further development, and as such this is included as a work stream within the NIA M&E

Phase 2 project. This includes a thorough review of the relevant literature⁷ and the current work on the NIAs' social and economic benefits and contributions to wellbeing. This will ground the development of this theme in the reality and practice of the NIAs. The evaluation and reporting will therefore be more comprehensive in Year 2, following development of appropriate evaluation approaches and the evaluation recorded in this report for Year 1 should be seen in this context.

The concept of human wellbeing brings together the range of social and economic benefits including: health; education and learning; social development and connections; symbolic/cultural/spiritual significance; and economy. These categories provide a way of making sense of social and economic benefits, and further work is needed to explore potential approaches in order to develop and agree a framework for their evaluation and discussion. Consideration will also be given in the Phase 2 project to overlaps between social and economic benefit categories and ecosystem services and the extent to which these can be considered separately.

The contribution to partnership working outputs, outcomes and impacts by the NIAs in Year 1

This part of the evaluation assessed the Year 1 Outputs, Outcomes and Impacts steps in the evaluation logic model under the Partnership Working theme.

The evaluation of partnerships in Year 1 has focussed on inputs, process and activities, however partnership working is also considered important as an output, outcome and impact, as effective partnership working can: ensure efficient and integrated planning, action and delivery in NIAs; increase resource mobilisation; facilitate information sharing and learning; strengthen leadership and influence.

A review of NIA Progress Reports revealed a small amount of evidence of partnership working leading to improved NIA outcomes, for example in terms of greater integration of actions to improve biodiversity and ecosystem services and more effective delivery of actions.



The Hidden Gems of Dearne Valley NIA at Adwick Washland (Alex Benson, 2012)

The limitations of Year 1 evidence on partnership working are considered to have two main causes: most of the effort in the Year 1 has gone into setting up structures and processes, which may be expected to produce outputs in Years 2 and 3; and outcomes of partnership working is not a significant focus in the M&E framework.

A number of questions have been identified which could be used in the Phase 2 project to focus the collection of additional evidence on partnership working in Years 2 and 3.

⁷ Collingwood Environmental Planning (June 2013) *Literature Review: Social and Economic Benefits Associated with Natural Environment Initiatives and their Contribution to Wellbeing*. Version 1.0.

Next steps

The Year 1 (2012-13) Progress Report is intended to assess as far as possible the first year achievements of the NIAs, but as the first report in a three year evaluation process is also a starting point. A number of development activities relating to monitoring and evaluation were foreseen at the outset of the NIA M&E Phase 2 project, including:

- For a number of indicators the monitoring approaches and protocols require additional development, for which research and working with small groups of interested NIAs is foreseen in Year 2, recognising the need to keep the burden on NIA time and resources to a minimum and for the M&E framework and protocols to remain flexible, accessible and user-friendly.
- At the end of each evaluation section in this report a list has been included to provide an overview of the data that may be collected or available and the analysis that may be possible in Years 2 and 3 of the evaluation. Much of these data will be gathered through direct contact with NIAs, although some may also be available through information exchange with other research projects and initiatives. All additional data and analysis proposals will be critically assessed to ensure they minimise any additional reporting or monitoring burden on NIAs.

- A comprehensive list of other relevant projects and initiatives are to be identified and the ways in which they relate to the NIA initiative considered. A dedicated work package within the NIA M&E Phase 2 project will be seeking to identify opportunities for learning and information exchange to inform the monitoring and evaluation, but also to help NIAs draw on and learn from activities and practice in other initiatives. Relevant



Assessing river restoration options, Nene Valley NIA (The Wildlife Trust, 2012)

project and initiatives could include other partnership based initiatives such as Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs), other landscape scale initiatives such as the Catchment Based Approach or Futurescapes, and other environmental initiatives with a spatial dimension such as the biodiversity offsetting pilots. Developing an understanding of which other initiatives and projects each NIA partnership are involved in will also help facilitate learning and the exchange of knowledge and information between NIAs. A further aspect of this work could help understand the extent to which agencies within the Defra family, as well as other organisations such as NGOs and local authorities, are integrating their work in practice and if further synergies are possible.

- The approaches to monitoring and evaluation under the Ecosystem Services and Social and Economic Benefits and Contributions to Wellbeing themes are to be developed based on research, working with NIAs and learning from the experience of other relevant research initiatives:

A key ongoing activity of the M&E Phase 2 project is the development of approaches relevant to the monitoring and evaluation of social, economic and human wellbeing outputs, outcomes and impacts of the NIAs. This includes research into social and economic benefits and contributions to wellbeing associated with NIAs and will propose an appropriate approach to capturing outcomes and impacts where indicators are not appropriate or sufficient. This work is intended to be carried out during Year 2 (2013 – 2014) of the three-year NIA programme.

- The indicator protocols and online reporting tool which is used by the NIAs to record all their monitoring and evaluation data are to be reviewed and developed further in Year 2. This will draw on the feedback already received from the NIA and the issues that were logged during Year 1. The developments to the online tool will potentially include enhancing its usability and functionality, support for users and reporting outputs.
- Developing an understanding of the overall contribution of an NIA at the landscape scale. A central aim of the NIAs is that they will benefit both wildlife and people by creating more and better-connected habitats at a landscape scale. Evaluating individual activities or achievements in line with the M&E framework themes may not enable a full understanding of the overall, landscape scale contribution the NIAs are making. In Year 2 the evaluation will seek to explore ways in which progress can be considered across themes and collectively in a spatial sense to better understand how landscape scale benefits are being delivered.
- Part of the ongoing work of the M&E Phase 2 project is to explore approaches to measuring change that is attributable to the NIA activities against a meaningful and robust baseline and / or comparators.

All of these development activities are intended to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of monitoring and evaluation for the NIAs, as well as enhancing the evidence base for the evaluation.