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Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

Evidence Project Final Report

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Project identification

1. Defra Project code: WC1061

2. Project title:
   Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Phase 2

3. Contractor organisation(s):
   Collingwood Environmental Planning
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   50 Westminster Bridge Road
   London
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4. Total Defra project costs (agreed fixed price): £ 418,030

5. Project: start date 11/02/2013

   end date 27/11/2015

6. It is Defra's intention to publish this form.

   Please confirm your agreement to do so.....**YES** ☒ **NO** ☐

   (a) When preparing Evidence Project Final Reports contractors should bear in mind that Defra intends that they be made public. They should be written in a clear and concise manner and represent a full account of the research project which someone not closely associated with the project can follow.

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   In all cases, reasons for withholding information must be fully in line with exemptions under the Environmental Information Regulations or the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

   (b) If you have answered NO, please explain why the Final report should not be released into public domain

Executive Summary

7. The executive summary must not exceed 2 sides in total of A4 and should be understandable to the intelligent non-scientist. It should cover the main objectives, methods and findings of the research, together with any other significant events and options for new work.

Introduction

The establishment of the Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) was announced in the Natural Environment White Paper[1] and contributed to England's strategy for wildlife and ecosystem services – *Biodiversity 2020*[2]. The NIAs were designed to enable partnerships (of local authorities, local communities, land managers, the private sector and conservation organisations) to develop and implement a shared vision for their natural environment and to demonstrate how a 'step change'[3] in nature conservation might be delivered at a landscape-scale. Following a national competition 12 selected NIAs were awarded a share of £7.5 million government funding for a three year period from April 2012 to March 2015.

The NIA Monitoring and Evaluation Phase 2 project[4] was commissioned by the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), in collaboration with Natural England, in February 2013. The overall objectives of the NIA monitoring and evaluation Phase 2 project, as set by Defra and Natural England, were:

- to assess the individual and aggregated contribution of the 12 initial NIA partnerships towards meeting biodiversity commitments in the Natural Environment White Paper (NEWP) – *Natural choice – securing the value of nature*, as well as outcomes in Biodiversity 2020 and other national and international objectives, targets and commitments ; and
- to gather evidence of approaches used within the NIA partnerships and their outcomes, to maximise learning from them and build a practical evidence base to inform future landscape scale initiatives about the NIA approach.

The project gathered quantitative and qualitative evidence and assessed the progress and achievements of the NIAs over the three year grant funded period, as well as learning from the NIA initiative to inform future integrated natural environment initiatives. The approach adopted used a combination of process

[1] *Natural choice – securing the value of nature* (HM Government, 2011).
[2] Defra (2012) Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services.
[3] Sir John Lawton's review imaged a step change being a shift from 'trying to hang-on to what we have' to an approach of 'large-scale habitat restoration and recreation, under-pinned by the re-establishment of ecological processes and ecosystem services'. Professor Lawton's vision was long-term: to 2050, and defined as a 'direction of travel, not an end point'.
[4] Collingwood Environmental Planning (CEP), with its partners GeoData Institute and Cascade Consulting, were commissioned to undertake the Monitoring and evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Phase 2 research project (WC1061).
http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&Completed=2&ProjectID=18555.

and impact evaluation. An online reporting tool, initially developed during the first phase of the NIA monitoring and evaluation project[5], was used to provide a structured data-entry tool for the NIAs to report and share data for their chosen indicators. The online reporting tool was reviewed and developed as part of the Phase 2 project.

Other elements of the project included: research to test and help increase understanding of different approaches to assess the difference the NIA partnerships made over and above what would have happened anyway (the counterfactual); and a monitoring and evaluation scoping study for the Countryside Stewardship facilitation fund (CSFF).

The purpose of the CSFF study was to use knowledge and methods gained in the NIA Monitoring and Evaluation Phase 2 project to help scope the design of the monitoring and evaluation for the CSFF. The study sought to identify where data sources already exist and how these could be used to inform lower cost options for the CSFF monitoring and evaluation, as well as identify what other data sources could be used to furnish more elaborate and therefore costly options for evaluation, i.e. where additional new data collection would be required. The study identified three main options for evaluating the CSFF.

Key findings

What did the NIAs achieve and what difference did they make?

More, bigger and less fragmented places for wildlife

Substantial contributions to *Biodiversity 2020* outcomes were achieved. The initiative accelerated and broadened the scope of biodiversity activities in NIAs, although some activities, especially those funded through environmental stewardship grants, might have happened without the NIA initiative but over a longer timescale. NIA partnerships maintained or improved 13,664ha of existing priority habitat (equivalent to about a quarter of the size of the New Forest National Park); and have restored or created 4,625ha of new priority habitat. The NIAs also restored, created or managed 225km of linear and boundary habitats, such as rivers and hedgerows. Activities to restore or create habitats have delivered multiple benefits, such as: improved habitat connectivity; development of recreational corridors; creation of open spaces; and the enhancement of ecosystem services.

Enhancing the benefits that nature provides for people

The NIA partnerships improved local ecosystem services and raised awareness of ecosystem services nationally through their activities and research. They delivered cultural ecosystem services by: working to improve landscape character; creating easier access to and the quality of greenspace; and helping people to engage with and understand the natural environment. They also enhanced supporting ecosystem services, for example by improving habitats for pollinators, and regulating ecosystem services, for example by through flood protection and carbon storage and sequestration.

The NIA partnerships worked to improve people's experiences of the natural environment and use nature for learning, art and cultural events. Examples include: a project in Birmingham and Black Country which brought together local residents and community groups in a deprived urban-fringe estate to improve their local open space providing opportunities to learn new skills, meet people and be physically active[6]; and in Greater Thames Marshes an environmental artwork was developed to improve understanding of biodiversity within the unique landscape in a country park on the Thames estuary[7]. In three of the NIAs, 26,500 people participated in educational visits[8].

Volunteers contributed over 47,000 days of their time to activities in all the NIAs over the three grant funded years, and volunteering increased in each of the three years, with the amount of volunteering in the third year twice as much as in the first. In total, 87% of volunteering time was on activities considered likely to lead to health and wellbeing benefits for the people involved (e.g. working in groups or doing physical work).

To illustrate the economic value of the benefits to ecosystem services, a study in one NIA (Northern Devon) estimated the value of conserving 1,500ha of Culm grassland at more than £6 million in value of water resource management and carbon storage generated over the three grant funded years[9]. The NIAs also generated local economic benefits through employment creation, showcasing and supporting small-scale local businesses, and enhancing the attractiveness of their areas for visitors.

Working with local communities, land managers and businesses

More effective partnership working was a key benefit of the NIA initiative. 10 of the 12 partnerships were able to get off to a quick start because they evolved from existing partnerships. The government grant enabled staff to be employed in NIAs to coordinate partnerships and encourage joined-up working. NIA

[5] Defra Research Project WC1029: Developing a framework for design, monitoring and evaluating pilot Nature Improvement Areas: Phase 1 Scoping Study.
http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&ProjectID=17960&FromSearch=Y&Publisher=1&SearchText=nature improvement&SortString=ProjectCode&SortOrder=Asc&Paging=10#Description

[6] See: http://www.bbcwildlife.org.uk/nia/projects/castle-vale-meadows

[7] See: http://www.placeservices.co.uk/projects/the-reveal/

[8] An educational visit is defined as any organised visit to an NIA site or centre which has an explicit educational objective.

[9] Cowap *et al*. (2015) *The economic value of ecosystem services provided by culm grasslands*. Available from:
http://www.devonwildlifetrust.org/i/The_economic_value_of_Culm_grassland,_April_15.pdf

partnerships were broader and better coordinated than would have been possible otherwise. They included organisations that are not traditionally involved in conservation work, such as local businesses.

Land managers were involved in, and undertook activities across all the NIAs, particularly related to sustainable agriculture. The NIA partnerships also engaged with their local communities, encouraging community involvement in decision-making, although the short timescales to prepare bids and commence NIA project delivery meant that much of the wider community and partner 'buy-in' had to be developed during project implementation.

Leverage

The NIA partnerships mobilised resources with an equivalent value of £26.2 million (including the financial value of volunteer time and services in-kind) in addition to the initial government grant funding. Of this total, £15.3 million was from non-public sources (e.g. private sector and non-governmental organisations).

What have we learnt from the NIAs?

Key lessons from the evaluation of the NIAs include:

- shared visions and objectives for the NIA partnerships improved communication between organisations, encouraged joined-up working and more integrated implementation;
- partnership-led, landscape scale land management contributed to successful implementation. However, sufficient resources need to be dedicated to local coordination and management if partnerships are to function well;
- the flexibility inherent in the design of the initiative was an important success factor;
- partnerships bringing conservation organisations together with local businesses, land managers, research institutions and local authorities proved effective in delivering land management in the integrated way envisaged by the NIA initiative;
- visible government support and leadership and a clear policy message provided impetus for local project delivery and helped local projects in sourcing additional resources;
- the scale of funding available to NIAs was critical to their success; the initial government grant, for example, enabled partnerships to employ staff, leverage match-funding and initiate demonstration projects that have encouraged others to get involved; and,
- longer term activity (beyond the three years of grant funding in NIAs) will be required to deliver sustainable impact, with associated monitoring and evaluation to understand if lasting changes have been realised.

Conclusions

The NIA partnerships achieved a great deal in a relatively short period of time. They developed partnerships, established shared visions and objectives for the natural environment in their areas, and implemented ambitious work programmes. Although longer term monitoring and evaluation would be required to understand if all the changes are sustained, in three years the NIAs delivered a range of benefits, including: real change in the quality and quantity of priority habitats; enhanced ecosystem services; joint working with a wide range of partners and the involvement of many people as volunteers or visitors, leading to benefits for local people and communities.

The NIAs represented an initial contribution to the 'step-change' that Professor Sir John Lawton envisaged: a new, approach to ecological restoration which rebuilds nature and creates a more resilient natural environment for the benefit of wildlife and ourselves, with a vision to 2050. A key challenge for the NIAs was how to sustain delivery: four NIA partnerships have already secured funding from a variety of sources; and groups formed from four other NIAs were awarded funding under the first round of the Countryside Stewardship facilitation fund[10] in July 2015.

It is too soon, however, to know the extent to which NIA partnerships will be able to continue to deliver all their objectives beyond the three grant funded years. The true value and impact of the 12 NIAs will only be realised in the longer-term, as achieving ecological restoration will require many years of effort, if they inspire and help provide a business case to enable others to follow suit and build on the experience and knowledge developed over the last three years. More generally, the lessons learnt are relevant to future development of policy on integrated management of the natural environment to deliver multiple policy objectives.

Project Report to Defra

8. As a guide this report should be no longer than 20 sides of A4. This report is to provide Defra with details of the outputs of the research project for internal purposes; to meet the terms of the contract; and to allow Defra to publish details of the outputs to meet Environmental Information Regulation or Freedom of Information obligations. This short report to Defra does not preclude contractors from also seeking to publish a full, formal scientific report/paper in an appropriate scientific or other journal/publication. Indeed, Defra actively encourages such publications as part of the contract terms. The report to Defra should include:

[10] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guide-to-countryside-stewardship-facilitation-fund

- the objectives as set out in the contract;
- the extent to which the objectives set out in the contract have been met;
- details of methods used and the results obtained, including statistical analysis (if appropriate);
- a discussion of the results and their reliability;
- the main implications of the findings;
- possible future work; and
- any action resulting from the research (e.g. IP, Knowledge Exchange).

Introduction to the NIA Monitoring and Evaluation Phase 2 project

The Nature Improvement Areas (NIA) Monitoring and Evaluation Phase 2 project[11] was commissioned by the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), in collaboration with Natural England, in February 2013. The project involved gathering evidence and assessing the individual and aggregated progress and achievements of the NIA partnerships over their three year grant funded period (April 2012 to March 2015)[12]. The project also aimed to maximise learning from the NIAs and build a practical evidence base to inform future integrated land-use and management initiatives. The final report from the project presents the findings of the monitoring and evaluation at the end of the three years.

The overall objectives of the NIA monitoring and evaluation Phase 2 project, as set by Defra and Natural England, were:

- to assess the individual and aggregated contribution of the 12 initial NIA partnerships towards meeting biodiversity commitments in the Natural Environment White Paper (NEWP) – *Natural choice – securing the value of nature*, as well as outcomes in *Biodiversity 2020* and other national and international objectives, targets and commitments ; and
- to gather evidence of approaches used within the NIA partnerships and their outcomes, to maximise learning from them and build a practical evidence base to inform future landscape scale initiatives about the NIA approach.

The project gathered quantitative and qualitative evidence and assessed the progress and achievements of the NIAs over the three year grant funded period. An online reporting tool, initially developed during the first phase of the NIA monitoring and evaluation project[13], was used to provide a structured data-entry tool for the NIAs to report and share data for their chosen indicators. The online reporting tool was reviewed and developed as part of the Phase 2 project.

The online reporting tool was structured around the monitoring and evaluation framework and associated indicator protocols. A draft of an experimental monitoring and evaluation framework for the NIA partnerships was developed as part of the first phase of the NIA monitoring and evaluation project[14]. The framework and the accompanying indicators and protocols were reviewed and updated extensively during the second year of the Phase 2 project. The framework addressed four themes (biodiversity; ecosystem services; social and economic benefits and contributions to wellbeing; and partnership working) and a number of sub-themes. A menu of indicators was developed, each with a supporting protocol to guide the NIA partnerships in how to monitor and report the indicator.

The overall approach adopted for the evaluation of the NIA initiative drew on guidance in the Magenta Book (HM Government, 2011). A logic model approach was used to provide the overall framework within which the evaluation was designed. The logic model was used to describe the relationship between the inputs, processes/activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts of the NIA partnerships individually or aggregated. This provided the framework for understanding and systematically testing the assumed relationships between the individual and collective outcomes (both short term and longer term impacts) of the NIA partnerships with the inputs, activities and processes.

The approach adopted used a combination of process and impact evaluation. The evaluation sought to understand how the NIA partnerships delivered their objectives (the process aspect of the evaluation of inputs and processes / activities), as well as what they had delivered for biodiversity, ecosystem services and social and economic benefits and contributions to wellbeing (the impact aspect of the evaluation focusing on outputs, outcomes and impacts).

Other elements of the project included: research to test and help increase understanding of different

[11] Collingwood Environmental Planning (CEP), with its partners GeoData Institute and Cascade Consulting, were commissioned to undertake the Monitoring and evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Phase 2 research project (WC1061). http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&Completed=2&ProjectID=18555.

[12] Note that this report, and the monitoring and evaluation project overall, covers the 12 initial NIAs that received government grant funding. It does not consider any of the locally determined NIAs subsequently established. Therefore throughout this report reference to "the NIAs" refers to the initial 12 NIAs that received grant funding only.

[13] Defra Research Project WC1029: Developing a framework for design, monitoring and evaluating pilot Nature Improvement Areas: Phase 1 Scoping Study. http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&ProjectID=17960&FromSearch=Y&Publisher=1&SearchText=nature improvement&SortString=ProjectCode&SortOrder=Asc&Paging=10#Description

[14] Developing a framework for design, monitoring and evaluating pilot Nature Improvement Areas: Phase 1 Scoping Study – Defra research project WC1029. http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&Completed=1&ProjectID=17960

approaches to assess the difference the NIA partnerships made over and above what would have happened anyway (the counterfactual); and a monitoring and evaluation scoping study for the Countryside Stewardship facilitation fund.

Policy background and introduction to the NIAs

The establishment of NIAs was announced in the Natural Environment White Paper[15]. The NIAs were introduced to create joined-up and resilient ecological networks at a landscape scale and to deliver these in an integrated way, enhancing ecosystem services including social and economic objectives. They were intended to be large, discrete areas where a local partnership had a shared vision for their natural environment which would play a part in helping to demonstrate how a 'step change'[16] in nature conservation might be delivered. The programme took forward the recommendations of Professor Sir John Lawton's report on Making Space for Nature (Lawton *et al*., 2010)[17] and links to the shift of emphasis from site-based conservation towards a more integrated landscape scale approach advocated in the Biodiversity Strategy for England (Defra, 2011) as a contribution towards commitments to the Convention on Biological Diversity[18].

The 12 selected NIA partnerships started work in April 2012, following a national competition which attracted 76 bids. The NIAs were partnerships of local authorities, local communities, land managers, the private sector and conservation organisations. The government NIA Grant Scheme provided funding to the partnerships for three years, and was intended to enable the 12 selected NIAs to help provide inspiration locally and build a practical evidence base.

The NIAs aimed to trial and test innovative, integrated and coordinated approaches 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. The variety of landscapes, locally defined objectives, and partnerships seen across the NIAs reflected this purpose.

A systematic yet flexible approach to monitoring and evaluation was adopted to measure the NIAs' progress, and to assess what was working well or less well. The NIA partnerships applied several new concepts where practical tools and assessment methods are still developing, relating to restoration of habitat connectivity and ecosystem services for example.

The monitoring and evaluation process

The NIA partnerships undertook monitoring and evaluation following a framework, which addressed four themes: biodiversity; ecosystem services; social and economic benefits and contributions to wellbeing; and partnership working[19]. The framework included 'core' indicators that were adopted by all the NIA partnerships, and 'optional' indicators chosen according to local priorities. The NIA partnerships used an online reporting tool to record their monitoring data at the end of each year. The NIA partnerships also submitted quarterly progress reports to Natural England, including financial monitoring and progress against their agreed objectives.

The overall approach to the evaluation used a logic model following HM Treasury guidance in the Magenta Book[20]. A logic model is used to help understand the complexity of a policy intervention and the relationship between an intervention's inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts[21]. The approach adopted was a combination of process and impact evaluation: focusing on how the NIA partnerships were delivering their objectives, as well as on what and how much they were delivering. Further research was conducted to help understand the difference the NIA partnerships had made over and above what may have happened anyway.

The NIA monitoring and evaluation project also supported delivery of NEWP commitment 11 to "*capture the learning from NIAs, and review whether further action is needed in planning policy, regulation or capacity building, to support their development*".

Evaluation of the inputs to the NIAs and the processes they used

NIA partnership financial and human resources

[15] *Natural choice – securing the value of nature* (HM Government, 2011).
[16] Sir John Lawton's review imaged a step change being a shift from 'trying to hang-on to what we have' to an approach of 'large-scale habitat restoration and recreation, under-pinned by the re-establishment of ecological processes and ecosystem services'. Professor Lawton's vision was long-term: to 2050, and defined as a 'direction of travel, not an end point'.
[17] Available at: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130402151656/http://archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/biodiversity/documents/201009space-for-nature.pdf
[18] www.cbd.int
[19] Note that the framework was initial developed as part of a separate contract: Developing a framework for design, monitoring and evaluating pilot Nature Improvement Areas: Phase 1 Scoping Study (WC1029).
[20] HM Government (2011) *The Magenta Book: Guidance for evaluation*. London, HM Treasury.
[21] ***Inputs*** relate to the resources (e.g. financial, people) invested in the NIAs; ***Activities*** relate to the actions undertaken by the NIAs to meet their objectives (e.g. planning and coordination of habitat creation interventions); ***Outputs*** relate to the immediate results achieved (e.g. completion of a specific activity on an area of land); ***Outcomes*** relate to the short and medium term results of the activities and outputs achieved (e.g. creation of conditions to support a priority habitat type); and ***Impacts*** relate to the longer term results achieved (e.g. establishment of an area of new priority habitat that is stable / sustainable).

In 2012 the 12 NIA partnerships were awarded a share of £7.5 million government funding for a three year period from April 2012 to March 2015. The grants to the NIAs were administered by Natural England. The reported total value of resources secured by the NIAs in addition to the government grant was more than £26 million. This included additional resources generated from public and non-public sources, and the financial value of services in-kind and of time given by volunteers[22].

Additional resources from non-public sources had a financial value equivalent to more than £15 million, including support from NGOs, academic institutions and the private sector as well as the value of volunteer time. Almost £11 million came from public sources (34% was national[23] and 8% local[24]). The ratio of additional resources to grant was 3.49:1, meaning that, including the financial value of volunteering and services in-kind, £3.49 of resource was secured, of which £2.03 was from non-public sources, for every £1.00 of the initial NIA government grant. Based on NIA financial reporting to Natural England, 60% of the total resources were used for project implementation (i.e. land management activity / improvement works including capital items), with an equivalent value of £20.3 million.

Most NIAs evolved from existing partnerships within their areas, though two of the partnerships were established specifically to bid for the NIA government grant (Marlborough Downs and South Downs). Partnership size varied from less than five formal partners (e.g. Marlborough Downs) to more than 50 (e.g. Birmingham and Black Country).

The government grant, and the additional resources secured, enabled the partnerships to employ dedicated staff (e.g. NIA project managers and farm-liaison officers) and a range of contractors. Between 2012 and 2015 the NIA partnerships also mobilised more than 47,000 days of volunteering. This equates to approximately six full-time equivalents (FTEs)[25] per year per NIA on average. Approximately 75% of this volunteering time was spent on implementation. There was almost twice as much volunteering on NIA activities in the third year compared to the first year of the grant funded period.

Government agency management of the initiative and support to NIA partnerships

Natural England was responsible for the delivery of the NIA programme. They provided overall programme management, oversaw the NIAs' implementation, and supported their monitoring and evaluation work. The NIA initiative was overseen by a Steering Group (established to have representation from Defra, Natural England, Forestry Commission, Environment Agency and Department for Communities and Local Government), which met regularly throughout the three grant funded years.

At the local level, Natural England provided support to the NIAs through a network of dedicated local officers. Natural England estimated they provided an average of almost 7 FTEs per year including national and local support. The Environment Agency and Forestry Commission also provided support to NIA partnerships. The Environment Agency estimated that the total support they provided was approximately 1.7 FTEs per year, with the majority of this spent on local support to NIA project implementation. Natural England and the Environment Agency both noted that their estimates of support are likely to be underestimates[26].

Defra funded external contracts to support the monitoring and evaluation of the NIAs in two phases overseen by a NIA monitoring and evaluation project Steering Group. This Group met formally 15 times during the monitoring and evaluation Phase 2 project.

Partnership working in the NIAs

The NIAs commented (through interviews with partnership chairs) that being based on existing partnerships, as 10 out of 12 were, was beneficial due to the time and effort required to establish new partnerships. Each NIA's shared vision and objectives supported partnership working through better alignment of different organisations' work plans and by providing common priorities to work towards. Some NIAs expressed the view that having time at the start of the initiative to collectively develop visions and objectives may have strengthened partnership working in the longer-term. By bringing together new partners with diverse interests, NIA partnerships were also able to develop relationships between partners who may not have worked together before, and helped establish a shared understanding of partners' objectives, drivers and areas of mutual benefit.

Establishing clear structures for coordination, delegation and communication of tasks and roles across governance and NIA project delivery groups was also seen as important. Key benefits of partnership working expressed by NIA partnership chairs through interviews included: agreed priorities across organisations that may not have coordinated activities before; breaking down barriers between

[22] Financial value of volunteer time calculated using standardised rates of: General unskilled labour £6.25 per hour, £50 per day; Specialist, skilled trained labour £18.75 per hour, £150 per day; Specialist services £31.25 per hour, £250 per day; Professional services £50 per hour, £350 per day

[23] Any government department or agency e.g. Defra, Natural England, Forestry Commission, Environment Agency including grant schemes Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) etc). May also include others e.g. Kew Gardens. Also includes other Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) e.g. LEADER; Biosphere.

[24] Local authorities and local authority funded organisations. Also includes National Park Authorities, AONBs, Internal Drainage Boards.

[25] For the monitoring and evaluation of the NIAs one full time equivalent (FTE) was equal to 230 working days of 7 hours

[26] For example, Natural England time only includes that coded to the NIA programme, and does not include other work programmes in NIAs even if these were contributing to NIA objectives e.g. Environmental Stewardship administration

organisations; sharing of data and knowledge; and involving local communities.

Evaluation of outcomes and impacts from NIA activities

Becoming much better places for wildlife

- The NIA partnerships have delivered activities to maintain or improve 13,664ha of existing priority habitat[27]; and restore or create 4,625ha of new priority habitat. They have also delivered actions on 225km of linear and boundary habitats, such as rivers and hedgerows, and 78 individual site based habitats, such as ponds. These activities represent a contribution to the delivery of England Biodiversity Strategy outcome 1A[28].
- The activities on 13,664ha of existing priority habitat represents 14.6% of the extent of priority habitat in the NIAs (and 3.5% of the total area of the NIAs). 13,664ha is equivalent to about a quarter of the size of the New Forest National Park. The 4,625ha of new habitat created or restored represents 2.3% of the England Biodiversity Strategy outcome (1B)[29] to increase priority habitats by at least 200,000ha[30]
- Activities were also undertaken to enhance habitat connectivity (which also represents a contribution to the England Biodiversity Strategy outcome 1B). Research related to enhancing and monitoring connectivity was an experimental aspect of the NIA initiative. In addition, NIAs have reported on various interventions such as changes in the total extent of specific types of priority habitat or mapping how NIA activities have created patchworks of habitat / stepping stones for species. However, due to the locally specific nature of habitat connectivity, a clear measure of the combined NIAs' contribution to enhanced connectivity was not possible to establish.
- The three-year period was generally too short to measure the longer term biodiversity impacts of the activities carried out. For example, even where appropriate habitat management may have been put in place, it may take many years before the full effect of that action (i.e. impact) becomes apparent, such as improved habitat condition, or improved status of key species.

Enhancing benefits for people as well as wildlife

- Some NIAs delivered actions specifically designed to enhance ecosystem services, such as flood protection (e.g. through watercourse maintenance) and carbon sequestration. Reflecting the integrated approach, all NIA activities related to enhancing or creating habitats or encouraging local people to engage with the natural environment, will have also enhanced ecosystem services.
- NIAs undertook specific studies which suggest that ecosystem service outcomes have, and will continue to be, realised. These related to the value of carbon sequestration and habitat improvements, for example.

Examples of NIA studies on the value of ecosystem services

A study completed in the Northern Devon NIA estimated the value of Culm grassland restoration and recreation work similar to that being implemented under the NIA project and concluded it:

> '… *provides an excellent return on investment. Over the next ten years, Devon Wildlife Trust aims to restore at least 5,000ha more Culm, which will more than double its water and carbon value to in excess of £20.5 million. The cost of this investment in Culm restoration and recreation is in the region of £2 million, giving more than a ten-fold return on investment*'. (Cowap et al, 2015, p.4)

Over the three grant funded years, the Northern Devon NIA has implemented actions on more than 1,500ha of grassland, suggesting a potential of more than £6 million in water resource management and carbon storage value over the three grant funded years.

The capitalised value of ecosystem services (the value at 2014 prices of ecosystem services over a time period of 100 years) provided by habitats created by Birmingham and Black Country NIA is approximately £2.19 million. A specific cost for the habitat creation activities associated with this valuation was not considered in the study, however this value compares to the total NIA government grant paid to Birmingham and Black Country of approximately £600,000.

- All the NIA partnerships engaged with their local communities through activities to increase

[27] Priority habitats were identified as being the most threatened and requiring conservation action under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UK BAP). In 2013, Natural England published a new priority habitats' inventory for England covering 24 priority habitats.

[28] Defra (2012) *Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services.* Outcome 1A: Better wildlife habitats with 90% of priority habitats in favourable or recovering condition and at least 50% of SSSIs in favourable condition, while maintaining at least 95% in favourable or recovering condition.

[29] Ibid. Outcome 1B: More, bigger and less fragmented areas for wildlife, with no net loss of priority habitat and an increase in the overall extent of priority habitats by at least 200,000ha.

[30] It is not possible to compare this to habitat creation and restoration in England as no assessment of change in priority habitat extent was made in the most recent (2014) England Biodiversity Strategy indicators report due to the adoption of a new priority habitat inventory in 2013.

participation in the natural environment (leading to more than 47,000 days of volunteering over the three years – as a comparison, the New Forest reported that in 2014/15 over 900 volunteering days were recorded from people taking part in their work that year. Whilst the NIAs covered approximately 9 times the area of the New Forest, the average number of NIA volunteering days per year was 17.5 times the number in the New Forest); and to encourage schools and other local groups to engage with and learn in and from the natural environment. In the three NIAs that reported on it, a total of 26,496 people had participated in educational visits[31] by the end of year 3 – as a comparison, in the New Forest around 10,000 students a year receive free learning sessions (New Forest National Park Authority, 2015)[32].

- The NIA partnerships carried out actions to enhance access to nature by creating and improving facilities and information at key sites. The NIA partnerships also made links between the natural environment and cultural and social values, such as through theatrical performances, art installations and events including photography competitions.
- The NIAs also generated local economic benefits through employment creation, showcasing and supporting small-scale local businesses, and enhancing the attractiveness of their areas for visitors.
- Case studies developed by the NIA partnerships and evidence from other research suggest that social and economic wellbeing outcomes have occurred in all NIAs. A summary of the case studies developed by eight of the NIAs to demonstrate their contribution to these benefits is presented in Table 1. Some examples of the activities and benefits involved from three case studies are:
    - The Castle Vale Meadows project[33] (Birmingham and Black Country) was used as a catalyst to bring local residents and community groups together to make improvements to their local open space. This was in a deprived urban-fringe estate that suffered from a poor quality physical environment with little access to natural greenspace. The project encouraged engagement with the natural environment, physical activity, and enhanced participant skills.
    - In Greater Thames Marshes an environmental artwork was developed to help improve visitors' understanding of biodiversity within the unique landscape in a country park on the Thames estuary[34].
    - The Morecambe Bay Woodfuel Project helped secure £444,000 in Woodland Improvement Grants and gain work for 52 local woodland management contractors, many of whom are small businesses. The project as a whole was considered by the NIA to have helped encourage and promote the development of the local woodfuel economy, a process which is expected to have economic benefit in the future.

Table 1: Summary of the NIA social and economic case studies

NIA	Case study name	Types of benefit presented within the case study				
		Health	Social development and connections	Economic	Education	Spiritual, cultural, aesthetic
Birmingham and Black Country	Castle Vale Meadow	✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓	✓
Marlborough Downs	Driving for the Disabled track works	✓✓	✓	✓		
Meres and Mosses	Down to Earth - Whixall		✓✓			✓✓
Morecambe Bay	Morecambe Bay Woodfuel Project		✓	✓✓		✓
Nene Valley	Community Panel Public Dialogue Project		✓✓		✓	✓
Northern Devon	Producing a Teachers' Pack to promote understanding of ecosystem services				✓✓	
The Greater Thames Marshes	Public Art Project at Hadleigh Farm	✓✓	✓			✓✓
Wild Purbeck	Getting Wild about Purbeck in Your School	✓			✓✓	✓

Key: ✓✓ = benefits delivered as explicit objective of the case study and ✓ = benefits delivered indirectly

Uniting local communities, land managers and businesses

[31] 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.
[32] http://www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/info/20016/our_work/54/annual_review
[33] See: http://www.bbcwildlife.org.uk/nia/projects/castle-vale-meadows
[34] See: http://www.placeservices.co.uk/projects/the-reveal/

- The NIA partnerships generally included a broader range of organisations than are traditionally involved in nature conservation, including local businesses. In addition, the shared visions for the natural environment and objectives developed at the outset helped improve communication between organisations and encouraged coordinated working. Local communities also played a role in all the NIAs, in particular through volunteering.
- Farming groups (e.g. National Farmers Union and the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group South West[35]) were formal partners in four NIAs, and one NIA was farmer-led (Marlborough Downs). This represented a different delivery model to other NIAs; for example a specific NIA delivery company was established and an agri-environment consultancy team was contracted to provide project management[36]. This approach was felt by the Marlborough Downs NIA partnership chair to have been very successful. Land managers have been involved in undertaken many activities across all NIAs, particularly activities related to sustainable agriculture. Land under environmental stewardship increased by 10.8% across the NIAs over the three grant funded years (2012 – 2015), compared to 7.2% across the whole of England over the same period.
- There is uncertainty about the extent to which local communities, land managers and businesses are 'united' in taking a collective, integrated approach at the landscape scale, and it is too early to say whether the relationships that have been formed under the NIA initiative are likely to continue after the funding period.

Becoming places of innovation and inspiration

- NIA partnerships sought to inspire people by: engaging people with the natural environment as volunteers and through public events; using nature for learning (e.g. through educational visits and training for volunteers); and connecting people with the local landscape through cultural and artistic interpretation (e.g. art, theatre, music and photography).
- The NIA partnerships completed research and tested approaches, for example related to the delivery and measurement of habitat connectivity and integrated land management (e.g. delivering ecosystem services, such as carbon sequestration or water management). Much of the research was undertaken in partnership with local universities and research institutes. This improved understanding in NIAs of how connectivity may be delivered and measured. For example, a paper was published on landscape scale conservation in Meres and Mosses NIA[37].
- With support from Natural England, the NIA partnerships participated in five best practice events and two annual forums which have provided a platform for presenting research and innovative practice to other NIA partnerships. These encouraged sharing of knowledge and experience between NIA partnerships, and supported learning. The outputs from the best practice events have been made publically available[38].
- The success of the NIA partnerships in working with land managers to encourage the uptake and coordination of environmental stewardship options across multiple agricultural holdings, with a focus on landscape scale biodiversity objectives, was a factor in the policy decision to introduce the Countryside Stewardship facilitation fund[39].

What difference have the NIA partnerships made?

The monitoring and evaluation project included research to understand the difference the NIA partnerships have made, over and above what would have happened anyway (the counterfactual). A separate counterfactual report[40] provides more detail on this work. Its findings are integrated throughout the main report.

The research provided evidence on the impact of the NIAs whilst also testing different approaches to measuring the counterfactual in complex environmental evaluations, to generate learning for future evaluations of this type. Three approaches were used. Approach 1 developed a 'counterfactual scenario' using semi-structured telephone interviews with seven national stakeholders and all 12 NIA partnership chairs, as well as an online survey of the NIA partners which was completed by 122 people[41] (see the summarises of the results from the interviews and survey in Table 2). Approach 2 was a trajectory analysis that analysed environmental stewardship data to compare trends before and during the NIA initiative and Approach 3, a comparative analysis that attempted to analyse similar data to compare NIAs with areas outside the NIAs.

[35] See: http://www.fwagsw.org.uk/
[36] For more information see: http://www.mdnep.org.uk/about.html
[37] Jones, M., *Landscape-Scale Conservation in the Meres and Mosses*. British Wildlife, June 2015. Vol 26 No 5, p.337-344
[38] See: http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/4553703239450624
[39] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guide-to-countryside-stewardship-facilitation-fund
[40] See Annex 1
[41] All 12 NIA partnership chairs were interviewed. Seven interviews were undertaken with national stakeholders, including the Environment Agency, Forestry Commission, Wildlife Trusts, RSPB, the National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust and the National Farmers Union. The online survey was shared with 260 individuals, including partner organisations and NIA partnership staff (project officers/managers, M&E leads etc.) the response rate was 46% (n=122).

Key findings from Approach 1 include:

- A substantial improvement in biodiversity outcomes due to the NIA initiative was perceived by survey respondents and partnership chairs, and most national stakeholders felt that the NIA initiative accelerated and broadened the scope of biodiversity activities in NIAs, although some felt that biodiversity activities funded through environmental stewardship grants might have happened anyway.
- The NIA initiative led to a greater focus on ecosystem services and in particular enhanced outcomes in flood and water management, based on NIA partnership chair interviews. National stakeholders felt that the NIA initiative raised awareness of ecosystem services and led to better coordination between Water Framework Directive and biodiversity activities.
- The NIA grant funding was felt by NIA partnership chairs to have enabled projects with integrated objectives (e.g. combining social and conservation outcomes) that would not have happened in the absence of the NIA initiative. Survey respondents perceived enhanced community relations to be the most improved social and economic benefit achieved by the NIA partnerships.
- More effective partnership working was felt to have been a key benefit of the NIA initiative. Partnership chairs expressing that the government grant enabled staff to be employed to coordinate partnerships and encourage joined-up working. National stakeholders felt that NIA partnerships were broader and better coordinated than would have been possible otherwise.

Approaches 2 and 3 were experimental and tested whether comparative data on uptake of environmental stewardship options could provide the basis for assessing the difference landscape scale conservation interventions (such as the NIA initiative) have in a particular area. No statistically significant relationships were found between the presence of the NIA partnership and the uptake of environmental stewardship options, in either the trajectory analysis (Approach 2) or the matched comparison analysis (Approach 3). This was due to the number of confounding factors, including important changes in agricultural policy over the time period examined and the wide variation among the NIAs themselves.

Analysis of NIA data from the online reporting tool and evidence from Approach 1 suggests that rather than increasing the total quantity of non-entry level stewardship agri-environment options, the NIA partnerships focused on improved coordination of options across their areas, both spatially and the types of options.

Table 2: Summary of views expressed as part of the counterfactual research (Approach 1)

Theme	NIA partners (survey)	NIA partnership chairs (interviews)	National stakeholders (interviews)
Biodiversity	• The majority of respondents considered that biodiversity benefits had been delivered over and above what would have happened anyway.	• The majority of partnership chairs considered biodiversity benefits to have been delivered over and above what would have happened anyway.	• Some national stakeholders felt that biodiversity activities funded through environmental stewardship grants might have happened anyway, but most national stakeholders felt that NIAs sped up delivery and improved coordination of these activities.
Ecosystem services	• Significant variation in responses about the extent that the NIA initiative has led to additional ecosystem service outcomes across NIAs depending on objectives and nature of NIAs.	• The majority of partnership chairs felt that there was a greater focus on ecosystem service outcomes from habitat management than would have happened otherwise. • Specific benefits noted included flood/water management, woodland products and carbon storage and sequestration.	• The majority of national stakeholders felt that the NIAs raised the profile of ecosystem services and some felt that improved coordination between Water Framework Directive (WFD) and biodiversity activities was achieved.
Social and economic wellbeing	• Respondents felt that community relations were most improved by the NIA partnerships among these areas of activity.	• The majority of partnership chairs felt that the NIA government grant funding enabled projects with broad objectives that would have struggled to get off the ground otherwise.	• No views were expressed by national stakeholders.
Partnership working	• 93% of respondents considered partnership working to be more (57%) or much more (36%)	• The majority of partnership chairs felt that funding for staff enabled people to work with and support other	• The majority of national stakeholders felt that the NIA initiative had led to broader and better

	effective than would have happened otherwise.	partners and challenged silo-thinking.	coordinated partnerships than would otherwise have existed.
Other findings	• Narrative comments added to the survey by respondents indicated an overall sense of achievement among partners. • 88% of respondents considered NIAs to have contributed to Lawton's vision, though a three year timescale was deemed too short to achieve large scale and lasting improvements. • A majority of respondents identified improvements in the development of a shared vision and sharing of information and resources. • A majority of respondents expressed that NIA status generated wider stakeholder engagement and had benefits in attracting match funding. • Additional workload and administrative burden were the main challenges expressed by the NIAs.	• The majority of partnership chairs felt that NIAs: provided a forum for bringing partners together around a common vision; and improved awareness of the landscape scale approach within partner organisations. • The majority of partnership chairs felt that the NIA government grant funding and NIA status acted as a catalyst for match funding and galvanising partners. Flexibility of use of funding was seen as critical. • Most partnership chairs felt that three years not long enough to make a real difference. • Some partnership chairs felt that the NIA government grant helped 'plug a gap' left by cuts to statutory agencies and local authorities who might otherwise have funded some of the types of activity completed by NIA partnerships.	• Some national stakeholders felt that the NIA initiative served to accelerate and broaden the scope of activities that may have happened anyway. • The majority of national stakeholders felt that: the flexibility of funding enabled new types of partnerships; and that committed, enthusiastic partners made a relatively small amount of money go a long way. • Some national stakeholders also felt that the NIAs helped to bring statutory agencies together and improved communication between them.

NIA partnerships' plans for the future

All the NIA partnerships have considered how they will continue to deliver their objectives in the future, focusing on the period to 2020. Based on information from interviews with NIA partnership chairs (January 2015) and NIA progress reporting, four NIA partnerships had already secured funding to support aspects of delivery at the end of the grant funded period and all NIAs were actively seeking funding to support their ongoing work. Common sources of funding being targeted included the Heritage Lottery Fund (for Landscape Scale Partnerships) (mentioned by six of NIA partnerships) and European Union funding (e.g. LIFE+[42] and INTERREG[43]) (mentioned by four of the partnerships).

In January 2015 Defra announced the Countryside Stewardship facilitation fund. Groups formed from four of the NIAs were awarded funding when the result of the first round of facilitation funding was announced in July 2015[44]. These groups were established to take forward land management action with Countryside Stewardship funding within the area, but working to smaller boundaries than the associated NIAs.

NIA partnerships were also exploring other ways to support ongoing delivery of their objectives and principles: six NIA partnerships specifically referred to existing Local Nature Partnerships, or other established local natural environment focused partnerships, as being integral to continued delivery of NIA objectives after March 2015.

Despite the expressed intent, the extent to which NIA partnerships will continue to be actively delivering NIA objectives is not known. Interviews with NIA partnerships in 2014 suggested that ongoing conservation work that may be consistent with NIA objectives is expected in all NIAs. However, this may not be branded as delivering NIA objectives or the NIA approach in future. Three NIAs interviewed expressed that the NIA had developed a strong local identity. Ongoing monitoring and reporting would be needed to understand the extent to which all the NIA objectives have been delivered in the longer term.

Lessons learnt

The NIA initiative was intended to be innovative, with NIAs testing approaches and helping to test what works. It was intended from the outset that the 12 government grant funded NIAs would represent a learning process and an opportunity to build a practical evidence base. The monitoring and evaluation framework and process was also experimental, with a key outcome being the lessons that have been

[42] See: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/funding/lifeplus.htm
[43] See: http://www.interreg4c.eu/programme/
[44] See: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/countryside-stewardship-facilitation-fund-successful-applications

learnt over the three years.

What worked well and why?

Shared objectives and joined-up working

- The process of creating shared visions for each NIA was valuable. For example, this brought diverse partner organisations together to discuss and agree priorities.
- The NIAs were involved in sharing data and knowledge both with other NIAs and between organisations involved within each partnership. In some cases, this led to improved communications between organisations that traditionally had not worked together.
- Joint working between partners within an NIA led to improved coordination and opportunities to achieve outcomes that might otherwise have been missed.

Integrated delivery

- The breadth of the NIAs' objectives (e.g. including objectives related to biodiversity, geodiversity and social and economic benefits) and the greater flexibility compared to other funding sources (e.g. agri-environment) provided opportunities to explore and exploit multiple benefits. For example, in Dearne Valley restoration of floodplain habitat through direct land management resulted in the creation of open water and lowland wet grassland habitat and flood storage potential, improving flows and habitat diversity.
- The integrated and coordinated approach to delivery, meant that NIA partnerships promoted conservation outside protected or designated areas.

People and partnerships

- The enthusiasm, energy and expertise of the people working within the NIA partnerships was a key factor in their success and helped them achieve a considerable amount in a short time.
- New partnerships require sufficient time to set up. The existing expertise in most NIA partnerships was also an important resource in the early stages of the NIAs. Nevertheless, entirely new partnerships were successfully established in two NIAs.
- Mobilising people and local community groups was of great benefit in assisting delivery of the NIAs achievements. The amount of volunteer time mobilised played a major role in successful implementation.
- At the national level, in 2012 the Secretary of State requested that Natural England, the Environment Agency and the Forestry Commission work together to support the NIAs, and this support was mentioned by many NIA partnership chairs as an important factor in delivery of NIAs locally.

The value of the government grant

- The government grant funding played an important role in the NIAs' achievements. For example, the NIA partnership chairs referred to it being a key factor in their success, especially the flexibility with which the grant could be spent and the focus on locally specific priorities inherent in the NIA initiative design.
- The government grant was important in mobilising additional resources, by encouraging match-funding and enabling NIAs to show potential partners that real change is possible, for example through demonstration projects.

Monitoring and research

- The structured monitoring and evaluation process provided potential benefits to the NIAs. For example, some NIAs found it provided a useful evidence base to make the case for how effective NIAs were in support of funding applications.
- There were many successful collaborations between the NIAs and the education and research sectors. For example, NIA partnerships engaged local universities to help undertake research and support monitoring (e.g. through ecological surveys and ecosystem service valuations).

What was challenging and why?

NIA Implementation and delivery

- The short timescale to prepare bids presented some challenges. For example, some partnership chairs reported that the limited time meant that much of the community and partner buy-in had to be developed during project implementation. They also noted that this may have resulted in lower levels of consensus being developed amongst partners early on.
- During the first year, particularly for the NIAs delivered by new, or much expanded, partnerships, the set-up time required meant that it was potentially difficult to meet delivery expectations.
- The three years of grant funding was a relatively short period – indeed, the Lawton review recommended that the initiative should be funded for 'at least five years'. This was confirmed by

some of the NIA partnership chairs who felt the three years was too short to see real sustainable change, especially for biodiversity outcomes.

- A key challenge at the end of the government grant funding period, as well as for the future, was how to continue delivery of each NIA's objectives. Some NIAs had already been successful in securing some new funding, although this may have different priorities and objectives.

Monitoring and evaluation process

- Even though it was inherent in the NIA initiative design, the experimental nature of the monitoring and evaluation framework and indicators, and the fact that both were developed during NIA implementation, was a challenging process for NIA partnerships and the evaluation team.
- Monitoring and evaluation required a lot of time and energy at the NIA level and needed more external support than was originally anticipated. A more streamlined approach and ongoing support are likely to be required if NIA partnerships are to continue monitoring.
- The online reporting tool provided a single portal to record NIA data following a common reporting structure. Some of the technical features of the tool, combined with the intended flexibility of the monitoring and evaluation framework, posed challenges and some users struggled to operate the tool independently even though guidance, training and support were provided.

What are the lessons for implementing, monitoring and evaluating integrated land-use and management initiatives?

Implementation

- An important success factor for the NIA initiative was the flexibility allowed in the use of the grant funding (i.e. how it could be spent locally). As intended, this enabled local projects to develop tailored expenditure plans aligned with local needs and objectives.
- The NIA partnerships showed that integrated delivery can work, for example using volunteers delivering conservation actions and engaging local schools and communities in their local environment can deliver benefits for both nature and for the participants.
- The NIAs demonstrated how projects led by partnerships can be successful. However, the time and effort needed to establish and maintain partnerships where they do not already exist should be factored into policy implementation.
- National (government) leadership and recognition was important for the NIA initiative: it motivated people delivering projects locally and provided authenticity and visibility that was used, for example, to support funding bids and to encourage wider engagement. This may not be present to the same extent for local, voluntary and unfunded 'NIAs'

Monitoring and evaluation

- One of the aims of the NIA initiative was to test and develop approaches to delivering integrated landscape scale, partnership-led conservation. In designing innovative and experimental approaches it should be recognised that monitoring requires resources, skills and planning and local projects may require support. In addition, longer-term monitoring may be required (e.g. for five years or more after end of funding period) to understand if sustained change in approaches to delivery, and associated outcomes, are realised.
- There may be different approaches and priorities between monitoring to assess progress in delivering local initiatives with evaluation of effectiveness across an initiative as whole. This can lead to a potential tension between reporting on monitoring project outcomes (e.g. successes in achievement) and evaluating them critically. Monitoring, and potentially evaluation, require the building of working relationships and connections with projects, which can conflict, or be perceived to conflict, with independent evaluation. While this is a common tension in evaluation, protocols and procedures can help overcome these issues.

What are the lessons for designing the evaluations of complex environmental policy?

Evaluation design, framework and objectives

- Setting clear programme level objectives at the outset to reflect the relationship between the programme and project level objectives can aid robust evaluation. A mixed approach that allows consistent monitoring and evaluation for some objectives and more flexible reporting to reflect local objectives may be effective, but where possible this needs to be established early in the project cycle.
- In designing an evaluation it is important to recognise that timescales of delivery (activities and outputs) may differ from intervention outcomes and impacts, and that many impacts, especially in natural environment initiatives, cannot be detected over time periods of less than 5 years and in some cases decades. Where possible, therefore, longer-term monitoring should build on existing data and plan for the re-assessment of key indicators after the funded intervention has completed. Process evaluation can also help to assess if delivery is on track to achieve intended outcomes and impacts,

even if these are beyond the initial evaluation period.

- An effective evaluation is likely to require an evaluation framework supported by, for example, a clear logic model. Given the potential for delays between activities and outcomes and impacts a theory of change[45] model(s) can be a useful approach, accompanied by mechanisms for testing/proving the theory of change.
- Full impact evaluation may not be possible for some complex policy interventions, especially where these are delivered over relatively short timescales, and it may be appropriate to scope during the policy design phase what it is possible for an evaluation to deliver.
- When considering the counterfactual, it would be helpful if options considered in the early stages of developing a policy / initiative had undergone some form of options appraisal (*ex-ante* assessment). Such assessments can help inform the development of counterfactuals for any subsequent evaluation at the policy / initiative level.
- Where possible a baseline should be established at the outset of an intervention to support monitoring - this can also be useful as part of a theory of change approach where time lags are expected before outcomes and impacts are realised. The creation of novel geographic entities and the varied objectives of the NIAs meant that in most cases locally specific baselines were not readily available at the outset. The NIA monitoring and evaluation project supported the NIAs in building a practical evidence base and undertaking research which will be valuable in the future.

Data sources and reporting

- A combination of quantitative monitoring data and qualitative information (e.g. from interviews and surveys) has been used in measuring and understanding the achievements of the NIAs. For natural environment policy implementation, qualitative data collection and social science research methods may provide relatively low cost evaluation results compared to quantitative approaches that require ecological survey or other monitoring effort.
- The use of existing national datasets and centralised analysis where possible can support effective, robust and efficient evaluation at both programme and local levels.
- Self-reported data and locally specific indicators can play a useful role in regard to representing the diversity of NIAs. However, the NIA initiative illustrated that such approaches require support and facilitation, and therefore resources, and may result in data that are not comparable across intervention areas.
- Regular progress reporting by intervention participants (e.g. the quarterly progress reports NIAs were required to submit to Natural England) can be a valuable data source for evaluations. This can be facilitated if it is designed and structured to aid combining and/or comparisons between NIAs.
- Careful consideration is needed in the commissioning and design of bespoke IT systems for short-term policy interventions to ensure that they are proportionate and provide value for money, taking into account the design, maintenance implementation and support costs.

Conclusions

This report illustrates that the NIA partnerships achieved a great deal in a relatively short period of time, meeting, and in some cases exceeding, their project objectives. They formed or developed partnerships, established shared visions and objectives for the natural environment in their areas, and implemented ambitious work programmes to deliver these objectives. Over the period 2012 to 2015, the NIA partnerships secured additional resources with a total value of £26 million, in addition to the initial government grant. Based on NIA financial reporting to Natural England, 60% of the total resources were used for project implementation[46,47]. The investment made by government in the form of the NIA grant, has enabled the NIAs to start to unlock and deliver integrated landscape scale activity that inspires people, mobilises resources and improves the natural environment.

The NIAs delivered a range of integrated benefits, including: real change in the quality and quantity of priority habitats; enhanced ecosystem services; worked with a wide range of partners and involved many people as volunteers or visitors, leading to benefits for local communities and the economy.

Key lessons from the evaluation of the NIA initiative included that:

- shared visions and objectives for the NIA partnerships improved communication between organisations, encouraged joined-up working and more integrated implementation;
- partnership-led, landscape scale land management contributed to successful implementation.

[45] HM Treasury (2011) *The Magenta Book Guidance for Evaluation*: A theory of change 'involves the specification of an explicit theory of "how" and "why" a policy might cause an effect which is used to guide the evaluation. It does this by investigating the causal relationships between context-input-output-outcomes-impact in order to understand the combination of factors that has led to the intended or unintended outcomes and impacts' (p.57, Box 6c)

[46] This represents an equivalent value of £20.3m, compared to the initial government grant of £7.5million

[47] i.e. land management activity / improvement works including capital items

However, sufficient resources need to be dedicated to local coordination and management if partnerships are to function well;

- the flexibility inherent in the design of the initiative was an important success factor;
- partnerships bringing conservation organisations together with local businesses, land managers, research institutions and local authorities proved effective in delivering land management in the integrated way envisaged by the NIA initiative;
- visible government support and leadership and a clear policy message provided impetus for local project delivery and helped local projects in sourcing additional resources;
- the scale of funding available to NIAs was critical to their success; the initial government grant, for example, enabled partnerships to employ staff, leverage match-funding and initiate demonstration projects that have encouraged others to get involved; and,
- longer term activity (beyond the three years of grant funding in NIAs) will be required to deliver sustainable impact, with associated monitoring and evaluation to understand if lasting changes have been realised.

Professor Sir John Lawton's Making Space for Nature (Lawton *et al*., 2010) envisaged the 12 initial NIAs[48] as being part of a wider and longer-term change in approach to wildlife conservation. The government grant funded NIAs represented an initial contribution to the 'step-change' that Professor Sir John Lawton envisaged: a new, approach to ecological restoration which rebuilds nature and creates a more resilient natural environment for the benefit of wildlife and ourselves, with a vision to 2050. The true value and impact of the 12 NIAs will only be realised in the longer-term as achieving ecological restoration will require many years of effort, and if they inspire and help provide the business case to enable others to follow suit and build on the experience and knowledge developed over the last three years.

Groups formed from four of the NIAs are among the 19 projects that were awarded funding under the first round of Countryside Stewardship facilitation fund grants in July 2015. Other groups with a proximity to NIAs, for example Farmers for Aqualate with the Meres and Mosses NIA, were asked to take account of local NIA objectives as well as other relevant strategies. Learning from the NIA initiative, the Countryside Stewardship facilitation fund represents a new approach within agri-environment funding (by encouraging groups of farmers and other land managers with neighbouring land to deliver Countryside Stewardship priorities in a way that creates better-connected habitats across the landscape)) which may help in optimising biodiversity outcomes at the landscape scale.

The lessons learnt from the monitoring and evaluation of NIAs that are presented in this report are also available as an input to the development of future policy on the integrated management of natural resources including, for example, as set out in the government's response[49] to the Natural Capital Committee's third State of Natural Capital report.

References to published material

9. This section should be used to record links (hypertext links where possible) or references to other published material generated by, or relating to this project.

All the published reports from the Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Phase 2 project are on the Defra Science and Research page and/or the Natural England publication page for the project.

The project generated the following reports:

Year 1 reports (2013):

Collingwood Environmental Planning (2013) Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Year 1 (2012-13) Progress Report. Defra Research Project WC1061.

Collingwood Environmental Planning (2013) Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Year 1 (2012-13) Progress Report. Executive Summary. Defra Research Project WC1061.

Year 2 reports (2014):

Collingwood Environmental Planning (2014) Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Year 2 (2013-14) Progress Report. Defra Research Project WC1061.

Collingwood Environmental Planning (2014) Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Year 2 (2013-14) Progress Report. Executive Summary. Defra Research Project WC1061.

Collingwood Environmental Planning (2014) Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Year 2 (2013-14) Progress Report. Annex: Literature Review: Social and Economic Benefits Associated

[48] Referred to as ecological restoration zones in the Lawton Review.
[49] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/462472/ncc-natural-capital-gov-response-2015.pdf

with Natural Environment Initiatives and their Contribution to Wellbeing. Defra Research Project WC1061.

Collingwood Environmental Planning (2014) Updated Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for Nature Improvement Areas. Defra Research Project WC1061.

GeoData Institute and Collingwood Environmental Planning (2014) Online Reporting Tool User Documentation and Manual Revision. Version 2. Defra Research Project WC1061.

Year 3 / final reports (2015):

Collingwood Environmental Planning (2015) Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund Monitoring and Evaluation Scoping Study – Final Report. Defra Research Project WC1061.

Collingwood Environmental Planning (2015) Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Final Report (2012-15). Defra Research Project WC1061.

Collingwood Environmental Planning (2015) Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Final Report (2012-15). Executive Summary. Defra Research Project WC1061.

Collingwood Environmental Planning (2015) Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Final Report (2012-15). Annex 1: Counterfactual Report. Defra Research Project WC1061.

Collingwood Environmental Planning (2015) Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Final Report (2012-15). Annex 3: Social and Economic Wellbeing Benefit Case Study Collection. Defra Research Project WC1061.

Collingwood Environmental Planning (2015) Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature Improvement Areas: Final Report (2012-15). Annex 4: Lessons learnt from the assessment of social and economic impacts and outcomes. Defra Research Project WC1061.