

Executive Summary



December 2013:
Final evaluation report

Access to Nature

“The evaluation has provided positive challenge through the programme and this has helped to ensure the programme has continued to evolve and improve – there has been no room for complacency.”

Access to Nature team member

Executive Summary

Access to Nature is a grant programme funded by the Big Lottery Fund and run by Natural England as a Changing Spaces award partner. Natural England works on behalf of a consortium of eleven other major environmental organisations and distributes £28.75 million funding, which aims to bring lasting change to people's awareness of, access to and engagement with the natural environment, particularly those with little or no previous contact with the natural environment. A total of 115 grants have been awarded, ranging from £50,000 to £500,000, including three flagship projects awarded more than £500,000.

This paper is one part of the final round up of the formative evaluation process that has sat alongside the Access to Nature programme across its lifetime. It focuses on programme management, providing a brief overview of the five years of Access to Nature and how the management challenges have varied over that time. The learning has been brought up to date with evidence about the later stages of the programme's management.

This paper has shown how the Access to Nature programme has been managed well and how the evaluation process has been an important management tool. Natural England adopted a new approach to the funder-grantee relationship and it is arguable that the effectiveness of the programme, and the high proportion of spend against budget, demonstrate the success of this in practice.

Moving forward it is the case that there is no Access to Nature successor programme, and Natural England has no programme of a similar scale on the horizon. However, there remains a not insignificant legacy for the organisation.

- There is a skilled and knowledgeable staff team. The skills extend beyond delivering a revenue based grant programme, and to the strategies and approaches that enable people with little or no previous experience of the natural environment to access and enjoy it.
- There is a richer understanding of the outcomes associated with engaging people in natural environment, as evidenced by the projects funded by Access to Nature, including skill development, health and well-being benefits, community cohesion, ambition and employability, learning about and appreciation of the natural environment, local pride etc.
- There is an extensive series of learning products that capture the breadth and depth of the evidence generated by the Access to Nature evaluation process.
- There is a detailed understanding of the contribution that formative evaluation can make to programmes and work streams.
- There is a body of organisations that have a track record of delivering challenging and innovative projects; which are more reflective about their practice and have enhanced skills in evaluation; and are more sustainable as a result.

To exploit and maximise this legacy, there are key steps that Natural England can take.

- Maximising the opportunities that the current political and strategic climate offer in terms of building on the work of Access to Nature.
- Exploring how the partnership approach embodied in Access to Nature can inform on-going work within Natural England following the forthcoming organisational refresh and its increased focus on delivery by and through partners.
- Remaining in a state of readiness to respond to opportunities to instigate new funding programmes, applying the learning from Access to Nature.
- Utilising the expertise that has been developed and particularly the extensive skills of the Access to Nature team to best effect within Natural England.
- Seeking opportunities to implement formative evaluation in other work areas to help build the Natural England evidence base.
- Continuing to respond to the findings from Icarus' evaluation of Access to Nature and Supporting Change and Impact, and to disseminate the learning from its published papers.
- Sharing the learning from Access to Nature both internally within Natural England and more widely.