

Species Survival Fund Interim Report

**SPECIES
SURVIVAL
FUND**

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List of abbreviations

25YEP - 25 Year Environmental Plan

CIC - Community Interest Company

Defra - Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

EIP - Environmental Improvement Plan

eNGO - Environmental Non-governmental Organisation

FCR - Fixed Cost Recovery

FTE - Full Time Equivalent

GIS – Geographic Information Systems

INNS - Invasive Non-Native Species

LNRS - Local Nature Recovery Strategies

MoRPh - Modular River Physical Assessment

RSPB - Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

SSF - Species Survival Fund

UKHab - UK Habitat Classification System.

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Executive Summary

The Species Survival Fund (SSF) is a two-year, £25 million fund delivered by The National Lottery Heritage Fund (Heritage Fund) on behalf of the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). SSF is delivered in England with input from the Environment Agency and Natural England. Its primary goal is to support species recovery through habitat restoration and creation, making early progress towards statutory targets for species abundance and the restoration and creation of wildlife-rich habitats.

Through the SSF, 20 projects were awarded grants ranging from £300,000 to £3 million, and were encouraged to contribute at least 5% of their total costs in match-funding. All projects must deliver against the core theme of habitat creation and restoration to support species abundance. Additional SSF priorities include creating joined-up spaces for nature, aligning with local plans, connecting people with nature, supporting climate change adaptation through nature-based solutions, supporting green jobs, and incorporating species monitoring or surveys.

Project delivery commenced in April 2024 and is scheduled for completion by February 2026. Projects are located in all English regions except the West Midlands and Greater London.

This interim evaluation report provides an update on project progress up to April 2025. It draws on:

- A Wave 1 survey of all 20 projects (December 2024-January 2025).
- Site visits to 18 of 20 projects (February-May 2025).
- Eight workshops with 43 staff across all 20 projects (March-April 2025).
- Analysis of project-level monitoring data submitted in January 2025.
- A desk-based ecological review of spatial data submitted by nine projects.

It is important to note that reporting against the statutory biodiversity wildlife-rich habitat target is action-based rather than outcome-based (quality), recognising the limitations of measuring ecological impact within a two-year period. The approach assumes that appropriate actions will lead to habitats of sufficient quality over time.

Process Evaluation

This section explores project implementation and progress, drawing on insights from the Wave 1 survey, monitoring data, and staff workshops.

Application Process

The opportunity to deliver habitat action was a key motivation for projects to apply for SSF, with almost half of all grantees (10/18) reporting it as their main driver to address the need for specific habitat restoration or creation in their local area. The availability of large-scale capital funding was also an important factor, cited by almost one third of grantees (6/18) as enabling landscape-scale action. Alignment with organisational objectives or strategies and the chance to build on previous work or existing partnerships were also motivators.

Grantees also reported being motivated by the SSF's focus on engaging people and communities with nature-based activity (4/18) and its ability to support river connectivity projects, which had previously lacked funding.

Most grantees indicated a strong emphasis on:

- Connecting people with nature (16/20).
- Supporting green jobs (16/20).
- Enhancing habitat connectivity (15/20).
- Collecting data through species surveys and monitoring (15/20).

This indicates that funded projects are well-aligned with the SSF's additional priorities alongside its core theme. Whilst most projects are looking to enhance capacity to secure green finance, this focus appears less prominent in early stages of delivery.

In terms of application support, 17 grantees used the Heritage Fund's online guidance and resources, and 16 attended a webinar. Nearly three-quarters (12/17) sought advice from arms-length bodies like Natural England or the Environment Agency.

Overall, grantees were positive about the application process, finding it clear and straightforward (7/17 completely agreed, 8/17 agreed) and proportionate to the funding amount. The bid awarding process was also largely viewed as transparent.

Delivery Progress

Initial project implementation has been successful overall, with all projects making progress. Many grantees were able to initiate delivery quickly due to early preparatory work such as securing landowner agreements and establishing partnerships prior to funding.

Key enablers for effective project delivery included:

- Effective partnership working, combining expertise, resources, and local connections, especially long-standing relationships with local partners.
- Volunteer and community engagement, providing essential hands-on support and reducing workload for core teams, freeing up budget for other activities.
- Timely delivery of capital works and habitat improvements, enabled by upfront SSF investment, allowing for coordinated and seasonal work not feasible with fragmented funding.
- Effective governance structures and the formation of mixed teams (senior managers, project officers, ecologists, rangers, green finance specialists).

Challenges faced in progressing project delivery included:

- Seasonal constraints and adverse weather (14/20 grantees), making some planned seasonal activity difficult to complete and, in some cases, compressing delivery timelines.
- Procurement of suitable contractors (10/20 grantees), with limited availability of specialists and difficulties attracting interest from appropriate contractors.
- Increased costs of materials and labour (9/20 grantees), leading some projects to scale back planned project activity.
- Delays in securing landowner permissions (9/20 grantees) and statutory consents (8/20 grantees), which was commonly described as time-consuming and has, in some cases, resulted in delivery delays.

Benefits to Nature

By January 2025, 14 of 20 projects had completed some planned habitat activity, indicating effective early delivery. All projects expressed high confidence that their work would result in high quality habitats.

- A total of 205.2 hectares of habitat have benefited from SSF action.
- This includes 33.8 hectares of habitat creation (17%), 38.0 hectares of habitat restoration (19%), and 133.4 hectares of habitat management (65%).
- The South West saw the most activity take place (125.4 hectares, 61%), followed by the North West (34.5 hectares, 17%). This is broadly in line with funded project geographies.
- Woodland habitats were the most worked on (131.2 hectares), followed by grassland (34.7 hectares), rivers (25.3 hectares), wetland (7.7 hectares), and heathland (6.3 hectares).

Delivery of habitat action has been primarily led by contractors (51%), reflecting the specialist nature of the work. Project staff have delivered 23% of activities directly, whilst volunteers contributed to 13%.

To date, tree planting has been a key method used, with 6,138 broadleaf trees planted across four projects. Nine projects undertook 454 small-scale habitat actions, such as installing artificial structures (e.g., owl boxes, hibernacula), pond restoration, and selective woodland management, with 43% creating or restoring wildlife-rich habitat. Wetland and coastal projects have seen rapid ecological responses from pond creation and improvement, attracting wildlife like dragonflies, swans, and geese.

Habitat connectivity has also been key, with 18 of 20 projects focusing on creating joined-up spaces for nature. Approaches include creating 'stepping stones' of habitats (e.g., grassland edge habitats, linking woodland pockets), removing barriers like fences, establishing 'linking features' (e.g., ponds, dams), and restoring riparian corridors by managing invasive species. The removal of weirs to improve fish migration is also a key action.

Skills and Capacity Building

The SSF has supported a total of 144 roles (108.6 Full-Time Equivalent) across 19 organisations. In total, 85 roles (59%) were newly created, and 59 roles (41%) involved the retention of existing staff. Of the newly created roles, 14 were traineeships and 7 were apprenticeships. The majority of roles (55%) are full-time, with over three quarters (76%) of these newly created. Most newly created roles are fixed-term contracts (87%) for 12-24 months. The final evaluation report will explore the longer-term retention of capacity and skill within the sector in greater detail.

The majority of both newly created and retained roles were mid-level positions (59% and 56% respectively), likely reflecting the need for existing project management skills within finite timescales, though 38 entry-level opportunities were supported. The South West (46 roles) and North West (40 roles) support the highest number of roles. Demographic data is available for 62% of roles (92/144), showing success in engaging younger workers (17% aged 25 or under), but underrepresentation of other groups, such as those from Black, Asian, or global majority backgrounds (1%).

Overall, 15 of 20 SSF projects have delivered training opportunities to 291 staff and 285 volunteers, with nearly half (49%, 78/158) linked to recognised qualifications. The majority of training (54%) focused on technical and task-specific skills (e.g., surveying, species identification, tool use). Health, safety, and wellbeing training accounted for 24%, and leadership/organisational development for 15%. Informal learning through peer support and knowledge sharing within mixed teams and partnerships was also highly valued.

Volunteers are a vital resource within SSF projects, with 3,202 volunteers having contributed to SSF activity across 18 projects so far. Of which, 675 volunteers (21%) were first-time volunteers with an SSF delivery organisation. Effective engagement methods have included focusing on local, place-based activities, offering a range of tasks and exciting opportunities, and providing training (e.g., Citizen Science). Challenges included staffing for volunteer management, ensuring commitment, and practical issues like access or transport.

Partnership working has been central to success, with 55 organisations formally supporting project delivery (up from 50 at application). Overall, 14 of 20 projects have formal partnerships, and all work in informal partnerships. The average rating for partnership collaboration was 4.1 out of 5, indicating strong relationships. Key factors for successful partnerships were clear communication and complementary expertise. Longstanding relationships and shared goals also contributed to effective delivery. Challenges included coordinating across different systems and processes, though these were generally minor.

To date, 19 of 20 SSF projects have conducted monitoring surveys, totalling 1,061 individual completed surveys. Volunteers carried out nearly half (45%) of all surveys, whilst suppliers were responsible for specialist surveys (e.g., UK Hab, MoRPh assessments). Species surveys (64% of total) primarily focused on birds (33% of species surveys) and pollinators (31%). Habitat surveys (36% of total) included habitat-specific surveys (34%) and established systems like UK Hab (27%) and MoRPh (9%). Projects recognise that ecological change takes time, with full impacts often requiring 3-6 years, and many have built in 5-year post-delivery monitoring periods.

Connecting People with Nature

The majority of projects have made good progress in delivering their planned connecting people with nature activities, with 7 out of 20 reporting delivery to a large extent. Up to January 2025, 19 projects have organised 358 events, reaching over 11,493 participants. Events were particularly concentrated in the North West (173 events, 3,698 attendees) and South West (110 events, 3,541 attendees).

Workshops were the most common mode of engagement (20% of events), but festivals and large-scale events had the greatest audience reach (41% of attendance). A substantial proportion of events were classified as 'other' (23%), including oral history interviews, guided walks, and site visits, highlighting the diversity of engagement. Project events largely focused on local communities (25% of records) and the general public (23%), with some targeting specific demographic groups like young adults (16-30) and disabled adults.

Project staff reported that volunteer engagement was key to success, with positive hands-on experiences leading to a sense of community ownership and reduced anti-social behaviour. Strong connections with schools and community organisations has helped access new audiences. Incorporating community voice into activity design has ensured relevance and built capacity within groups. Challenges included establishing relationships in new areas, engaging individuals outside established groups (due to socio-economic barriers or lack of prior interest), and balancing recruitment with retention.

Almost all SSF projects (17/19) made efforts to engage new audiences, often by connecting with community and local groups, attending events, and collaborating with schools and colleges. Some specifically targeted underrepresented groups (e.g., young people, refugees, individuals with health conditions) through partnerships and by removing barriers like transport costs or lack of facilities. A wide range of inclusive activities have been offered, including family nature days, forest school sessions, and tailored school visits, with a focus on children with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Impact Evaluation

This section explores the SSF's impact up to April 2025, using project spatial data and insights from workshops. Only nine of 20 projects have submitted spatial data so far for completed habitat actions, meaning current reporting is an underestimation of total progress.

Overview

In total, 205.2 hectares of habitat have benefited from SSF action across England. This comprises 33.8 hectares of habitat creation (17%), 38.0 hectares of habitat restoration (19%), and 133.4 hectares of habitat management (65%). This represents 2.8% of the anticipated 7,316 hectares total funded area.

- The South West has seen the most action on habitats (125.4 hectares, 61%), followed by the North West (34.5 hectares, 17%).
- A range of habitats have benefited from SSF-funded creation, restoration, and management actions, including 131.2 hectares woodland and forest, 34.7 hectares of grassland, 25.3 hectares rivers, 7.7 hectares wetland and 6.3 hectares heathland and scrub.
- The majority of actions have taken place outside protected sites, with 17% of spatial data submitted located within protected sites (34.4 hectares).

Of all SSF action, 104.3 hectares have been reviewed as likely to contribute to the statutory wildlife-rich habitat target. This action has been completed by eight projects and includes 8.7 hectares (8%) habitat creation, and 95.6 hectares (92%) of habitat restoration.

- The South West reported the largest area of wildlife-rich habitat intervention (67.2 hectares, 64%), predominantly restoration. The East of England followed with 14.1 hectares (13%), and the North West with 13.4 hectares (13%).
- Woodland and forest habitats were the key driver for statutory target reporting, accounting for 55.2 hectares (53%) of created or restored wildlife-rich habitat. Rivers and lakes contributed 24.5 hectares (24%), grassland 22.7 hectares (22%), and wetland 1.9 hectares (2%).

The ecological review, undertaken by Environment Systems, shows that high-confidence outcomes are mostly associated with hydrological activities (e.g., river restoration, pond creation) and targeted woodland management (e.g., invasive species control). These actions are well-evidenced and expected to produce improvements in habitat condition and biodiversity potential. Project staff consistently acknowledged that many outcomes, particularly species recovery, are longer-term goals, with SSF-funded activity seen as part of a broader, long-term journey.

Rivers and Lakes

Five projects have completed action on rivers and lakes, affecting 25.3 hectares of freshwater habitats, including 5.4 hectares of creation and 19.9 hectares of restoration. Rivers and streams accounted for 18.4 hectares, primarily restoration, whilst standing open water and canals accounted for 6.9 hectares, including 5.2 hectares of creation.

24.5 hectares of freshwater habitats are likely to become wildlife-rich as a result of SSF activities, predominantly through restoration (19.1 hectares). Most restoration focused on rivers and streams (17.8 hectares).

Ecological review of these activities confirmed high confidence in actions like riverbank regrading, riparian planting, woody habitat creation, weir removal, and creation of new chalk streams, recognising their effectiveness in restoring hydrological function and enhancing river resilience. Pond creation and enlargement also showed high confidence for improving biodiversity and habitat diversity.

Project staff also reported early visible wildlife responses from pond creation and weir removal, with new sites quickly used by dragonflies, swans, and geese. The removal of physical barriers is expected to enhance species movement and improve ecological connectivity along river corridors over time. Staff expect these interventions to support the return of key species like white-clawed crayfish, great crested newts, and various fish and bird species.

Grassland, Heathland and Woodland

Nine projects have completed actions on 172.2 hectares of grassland, heathland and scrub, and woodland and forest habitats. This included 26.2 hectares of creation, 102.1 hectares of restoration, and 43.9 hectares of management.

- Broadleaved mixed and yew woodland saw the largest area of work (131.2 hectares), with considerable restoration and management.
- Neutral grassland (19.9 hectares) primarily involved creation and restoration, whilst Calcareous grassland (12.7 hectares) involved only restoration.

Five projects completed action to create or restore wildlife-rich grassland, heathland, or woodland, totalling 77.9 hectares. Restoration accounted for 75.4 hectares, primarily targeting woodlands (55.2 hectares) and calcareous grassland (12.7 hectares). Creation (2.5 hectares) focused on dwarf shrub heath and broadleaved mixed and yew woodland.

The ecological review of grassland actions showed medium confidence for seeding but lower for bramble management due to the ongoing effort required. Hydrological restoration in lowland meadows received high confidence. In heathland, scrub clearance received medium confidence due to regrowth prevention needs. In woodlands, conifer and other shading species removal showed high confidence for native vegetation recovery. Wet woodland interventions (leaky dams, floodplain reconnection) also had high confidence.

Project staff also noted visible changes in habitats, such as tree felling, new grazing strategies, and removal of fences around hedgerows, leading to noticeable changes in vegetation and increased sightings of birds and pollinators (e.g., skylarks). Staff also linked these interventions to improved connections between local people and the natural environment, with visible changes reducing access barriers and encouraging positive community engagement.

Wetland and Coastal Habitats

Three projects completed action on 7.7 hectares of fen, marsh, and swamp habitats, including 2.2 hectares of creation and 5.4 hectares of restoration. No management activities were recorded for this habitat type.

Four projects completed action to create or restore wildlife-rich wetland and coastal habitats, resulting in 1.9 hectares likely to become wildlife-rich. The majority (1.1 hectares) was restored, with a smaller portion (0.18 hectares) created.

The ecological review assigned high confidence to actions such as creation of gipes and ditches, muddy margins, removal of encroaching scrub, and rewetting efforts, recognising their effectiveness in improving wetland bird habitat and supporting wider biodiversity. Fencing for purple moor grass and rush pastures also showed high confidence for increasing biodiversity and watercourse quality.

Project staff also reported quick and visible impacts on wildlife in wetland and coastal habitats after pond creation or rewetting, with increased frogspawn, owls, badgers, and bitterns. Infrastructure-based interventions (e.g., water control systems, habitat reconnection) enhanced wetland functionality, particularly improving site resilience to climate pressures like drought. This has influenced how landowners manage their sites.

Skills and Capacity Building

SSF has provided sufficient resources for species and habitat surveys, enabling projects to monitor their delivery impact. This is a key benefit, as similar programmes often lack adequate monitoring resources. With over half of training focused on technical and task-specific ecological skills, staff and volunteers have strengthened their capacity for long-term site monitoring, enabling assessment of ecological benefits beyond the funding period. In some cases, sites were surveyed for the first time, establishing baselines and fostering long-term, community-based monitoring capacity.

Partnership working is a notable impact, both strategically and practically. Collaboration has encouraged grantees to think more strategically, explore future funding opportunities, and strengthen existing relationships. The exchange of learning and expertise between partners has been crucial for long-term success and monitoring.

Connecting People with Nature

Community engagement is a key impact of SSF activity, leading to improved individual wellbeing through participation and a growing sense of long-term interest and care for project sites. Project staff observed local enthusiasm translating into positive community responses and a feeling that sites are being looked after. This connection between people and place is expected to contribute to the sustainability and legacy of project outcomes, leading to increased long-term care for sites, stronger volunteer capacity, and broader support for protection and conservation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This interim report confirms that good early progress has been made across the SSF portfolio, with impacts emerging after the first year of delivery.

Process Findings

The SSF has met a clear need for large-scale, landscape-based interventions, particularly in areas perceived as underfunded, such as rivers and mixed landscapes. The application process was generally positive, clear, and proportionate. Whilst grantees suggested a longer application window for better planning and partner engagement, this needs to be weighed against the risks of overinvestment prior to award.

Project delivery is progressing well, with many projects initiating rapidly due to preparatory work and established partnerships. Key early-stage activities like woodland management, wetland enhancement, and invasive species removal have been completed. Effective governance, clear communication, and strong stakeholder relationships have supported timely delivery, with hands-on volunteer support reducing workload and reallocating budget.

Common challenges have included adverse weather, delays in statutory consents, contractor availability, and rising costs. These challenges highlight that extreme weather will likely continue to impact project delivery and post-project monitoring due to climate change.

SSF's upfront investment and flexibility enabled coordinated and seasonal work often not feasible under other funding models, allowing projects to embed long-term resilience through infrastructure and habitat connectivity aligned with the Lawton Principles ('bigger, better, more joined up').

SSF has made a meaningful contribution to capacity building, supporting 144 roles (108.6 FTE), with 57% newly created. Whilst recruitment has faced challenges due to short-term contracts, skilled teams were largely assembled. The long-term impact on organisational capacity and knowledge retention from these fixed-term jobs requires further exploration.

Diverse and impactful engagement strategies have connected people with nature, with 19 projects delivering 358 public events, reaching over 11,493 participants. Projects actively addressed barriers to participation through practical interventions.

Impact Findings

By January 2025, SSF-funded projects have completed ecological works across 205.2 hectares of habitat, primarily through management (65%), restoration (19%), and creation (17%). Woodlands have been the most impacted habitat (131.2 hectares, 64%).

104.3 hectares have been reviewed as likely to contribute to the statutory wildlife-rich habitat target. Restoration activities account for the majority of this contribution (92%). Woodland and forest habitats (55.2 hectares, 53%) were the key drivers for statutory target reporting. Project activities generally employed established ecological interventions consistent with best-practice conservation, leading to high confidence in outcomes from both project teams and the ecological review.

Project staff reported early wildlife responses and visible habitat changes, indicating successful delivery. However, full ecological impacts, especially species recovery and water quality, will require longer assessment periods.

Building skills among project teams and volunteers has enhanced long-term site monitoring capacity. Many sites were surveyed for the first time, improving understanding of existing biodiversity. Training volunteers in monitoring techniques helps build long-term, community-based monitoring capacity, a key impact supporting sustainability planning.

Community engagement is a crucial impact, with local enthusiasm leading to improved site stewardship and care. This connection between people and nature is vital for the long-term sustainability and legacy of project outcomes.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made for future similar funding initiatives:

1. Adverse weather conditions, including extreme events linked to climate change, have been a common cause of project delays within SSF. Given the increasing severity and frequency of adverse weather conditions, future environmental initiatives should extend delivery timeframes to a minimum of three years and include a clearly defined project planning phase. This is particularly important for projects that are ambitious or delivered at a landscape scale. This would result in a range of benefits. For example, many habitat activities are seasonally dependent and can only be delivered under suitable weather conditions, therefore more time would allow grantees to better adapt delivery based on weather events outside of their control. Additionally, longer delivery timeframes would help to mitigate weather-related risks and allow grantees more time to effectively engage landowners and communities and secure statutory consents. Extending delivery windows will also help ensure that programme expectations are responsive to the external challenges faced by grantees.
2. Given the generally positive feedback on the application process, the current application timelines should be retained for future similar programmes. Retaining this approach helps minimise the risk of applicants overcommitting resources prior to funding decisions. However, where the delivery period is less than two years, future funding initiatives should consider encouraging applicants to secure landowner consents, or consent in principle, prior to project award to help prevent delivery delays. It is recognised that doing so may require an extension to the application window.
3. The integration of species and habitat monitoring within project delivery has been a key success of the SSF, strengthening the capacity of grantees and partner organisations to carry out long-term site monitoring. Future initiatives should continue to encourage applicants to embed habitat and species monitoring within their project plans and consider including ringfenced funding to support this activity where needed. This approach will help ensure the collection of more consistent, robust evidence across the sector and support long-term impact assessment.

1 Introduction

The Species Survival Fund (SSF) is a two-year £25 million fund delivered by The National Lottery Heritage Fund (Heritage Fund) on behalf of the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). The SSF is being delivered in England with input from the Environment Agency and Natural England.

The SSF looks to support species recovery through the restoration and creation of habitats to make early progress towards the statutory targets for species abundance and the restoration and creation of wildlife-rich habitats (referred to collectively as the statutory Biodiversity Targets). The 2030 species abundance target requires government to halt species decline by 2030. The long-term target requires the Government to improve species abundance by at least 10% relative to 2030 by 2042. The biodiversity target for wildlife-rich habitat is to create or restore over 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat outside of protected sites by 2042. It is also anticipated that SSF project activity will support the species extinction target to reduce the risk of national species extinction by 2042.

Through the SSF, 20 projects were awarded grants between £300,000 and £3 million and were encouraged to contribute at least 5% of project total costs in match-funding. All projects are required to deliver against the following core theme of:

- Habitat creation and restoration, including ecosystem restoration, to support species abundance at a landscape, catchment or local scale, either within or outside of protected sites. This can include targeted actions taken as part of wider habitat creation or restoration projects.

Projects were also encouraged to deliver against the following additional SSF priorities to:

- Create more joined-up space for nature on land, including along rivers and streams.
- Align with local plans.
- Connect people with nature where appropriate, improving access and engagement with nature and benefiting health and wellbeing.
- Support climate change adaptation, and where relevant, mitigation benefits, through the use of nature-based solutions that provide multiple benefits for climate, biodiversity and people.
- Support green jobs, including apprenticeships, particularly in areas of high unemployment that need economic investment, and
- Incorporate species monitoring or surveys for sites lacking this information, provided this leads to improvements for biodiversity implemented during the project.

It is anticipated that the SSF projects will deliver benefits for nature for 7,316 hectares, across 248 sites. SSF project delivery commenced in April 2024 and is scheduled to be completed by February 2026.

1.1 Project Geography

The SSF has funded projects across the country, with projects located in all English regions except for the West Midlands and Greater London.

The geographic distribution of projects can be understood in multiple ways. Project location here refers to the postcode provided by projects at the time of application, which uses a single point to represent the location of project activity. This is used to determine the main region of project activity. However, it is recognised that projects are delivering over several sites and, in some cases, multiple regions.

To illustrate the regional distribution outlined in the table above, Figure 1.1 shows the project location of the 20 projects. The map shows there are clusters of projects across England. Six projects are located within proximity of Manchester, Sheffield, and Nottingham, whilst three projects are delivering activity near the North East coast. Five projects are located in the area close to Bristol and Southampton.

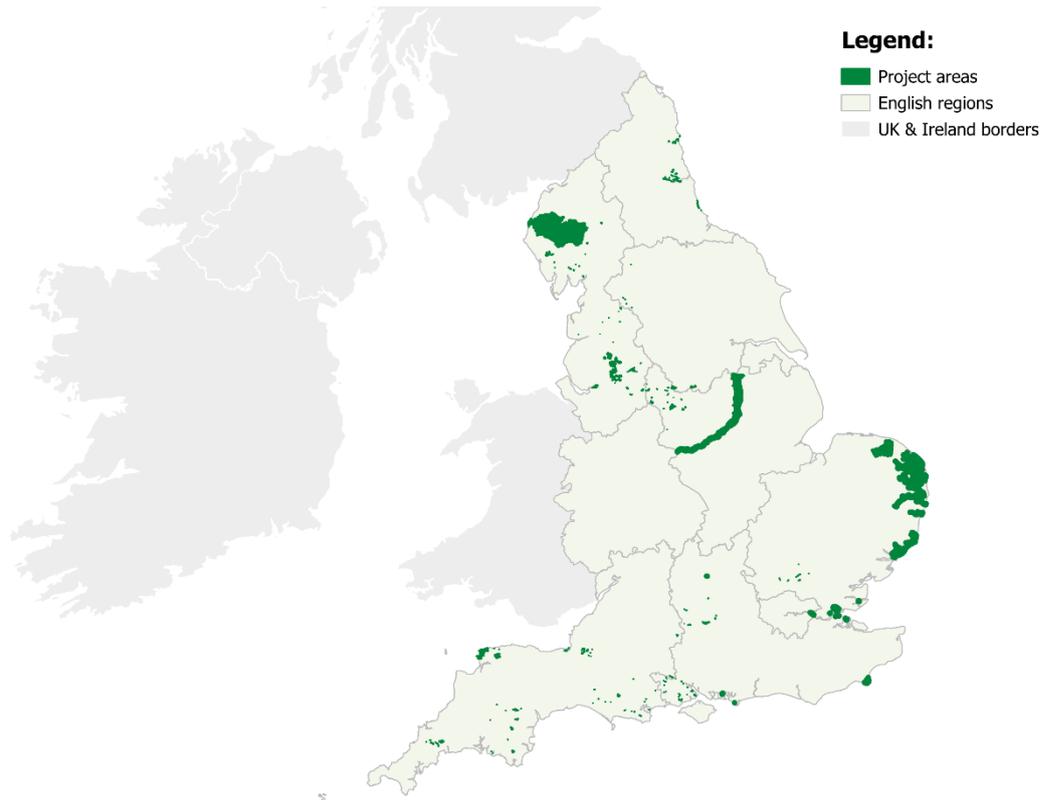
Figure 1.1: Project location by delivery organisation postcode



Base: Monitoring information.

The geographic distribution of projects can also be represented spatially using project area. This spatial data was submitted by projects at the time of application and should be interpreted within the context of the type of habitat in which action is taking place. For example, some projects are delivering landscape-scale restoration activity, some are seeking to improve habitat connectivity over multiple sites, and others may be carrying out activities across riparian habitats on either a river or catchment scale. These activities will all present differently on the map below (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2: Project location by project areas



Base: Monitoring information.

1.2 The Evaluation

The Heritage Fund commissioned Wavehill and Environment Systems in July 2024 to undertake a process and impact evaluation of the SSF. The evaluation will run between July 2024-June 2026. This interim evaluation report provides an update on project progress up to April 2025.

Wavehill is an independent social and economic research company with evaluation expertise relating to nature and biodiversity, connecting people with nature, employability and training, and economic development. Wavehill has led on the process, impact and value for money aspects of the evaluation.

Environment Systems is an environmental and agricultural data consultancy with expertise in habitats, ecology, and Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Environment Systems is leading the ecological evaluation, including reporting against the statutory biodiversity targets.

It is important to note that reporting against the statutory wildlife-rich habitat target is the priority for this evaluation. The habitat target is action-based rather than outcome-based (quality). This approach recognises the limitations of measuring ecological impact within a two-year period and instead operates on the assumption that, if the correct actions are undertaken, habitats of sufficient quality will be restored/created over time.

1.3 Methodology

To inform the approaches and lines of enquiry that will be taken within this evaluation, a range of research activity was delivered between December 2024- April 2025:

- The first of two waves of a survey (Wave 1) of all 20 projects (December 2024-January 2025) to obtain grantee feedback on the motivations and implementation of project delivery and to identify if and how projects are progressing towards their desired outputs, reflecting on any strengths and challenges with project delivery to date. Please note that some grantees did not answer every question within the survey. As a result, the total number of responses presented throughout this report reflects the response rate for each individual question.
- Site visits to 18 of 20 projects (February-May 2025) to observe project-level activity to better understand project delivery and aims. Please note that the final two site visits anticipated for Wave 1 will be completed between June-August 2025. The site visits will inform longitudinal case studies that will be developed after a subsequent site visit to be undertaken in the next stage of the evaluation.
- 8 workshops which included 43 staff across all 20 projects (March-April 2025). These workshops were an opportunity for grantees and their partners to explore key strengths and challenges of project delivery to date with other project staff. The workshops were also designed to ensure that project staff could share their experiences and learn from one another.
- Analysis of project-level monitoring data submitted in January 2025 by all 20 projects, including outputs relating to tree planting, small-scale actions on habitats, jobs and apprenticeships, skills, monitoring and surveys, and connecting people with nature.
- A desk-based ecological review of spatial data submitted. Spatial data was submitted for 64 sites where SSF-funded actions have been completed, with nine projects submitting spatial data for almost 150 actions to date. This data has been analysed to inform both an assessment of the impact of the SSF on habitats and to contribute to the statutory habitat target reporting.

- The ecological evaluation approach to reporting against the statutory habitat target involves six key steps:
 - Step 1: Data Standards – This involved an internal review and pre-processing of spatial data to ensure suitability for analysis.
 - Step 2: Data Validation – Reviewing the ecological data submitted by projects to assess the accuracy of reported baseline habitats and determine if actions delivered were appropriately classified as habitat creation, restoration, or management. It also involves auditing baseline conditions against actions, verifying consistency, raising queries for discrepancies, and applying expert judgement when responses are unclear. An internal confidence rating is applied to each assessment.
 - Step 3: Data Cleaning – The spatial dataset is refined by identifying and excluding habitat actions not eligible for statutory targets. Actions not meeting the statutory target requirements are still included in wider SSF-funded action reporting.
 - Step 4: Data Triangulation – Reviewing how grantees identify and manage ecological risks and their self-assessed confidence levels in achieving 'good' condition wildlife-rich habitat.
 - Step 5: Confidence Assessment – Evaluating target habitats and actions undertaken to create, restore, or manage them, assessing the appropriateness and suitability of implemented actions for ecological outcomes.
 - Step 6: Data Analysis – The desk-based and confidence reviews are spatially evaluated with regard to protected sites and their English region.

Please note that more detail on approaches to analysis and methodological limitations are provided in Annex A.

2 Process Evaluation

This section explores project implementation and progress to date, drawing on evidence from the Wave 1 survey with project grantees, monitoring data collected up to January 2025, and insights from workshops involving staff from across the 20 projects. It includes grantees' views on the application process and examines delivery progress across the evaluation's key thematic areas: benefits for nature, skills and capacity building, and connecting people with nature.

2.1 Application Process

Section Summary

- The opportunity to deliver habitat action was a key motivation for projects to apply for SSF, as well as the availability of large-scale capital funding.
- Responses to the Wave 1 survey suggested that grantees placed a strong emphasis on connecting people with nature and supporting green jobs as part of their project aims, in addition to habitat connectivity and building capacity for surveys and monitoring.
- Funded projects demonstrated strong engagement with the application support offered, with positive feedback on webinars and support from Heritage Fund.
- Overall, grantees were positive about the application process, reporting that it was proportionate to the funding amount and that the award process was transparent.
- Feedback on the application process included suggestions for a longer application window, particularly for multi-partner bids.

2.1.1 Grantee Motivations and Project Aims

Within the Wave 1 survey, half of all grantees who replied to the survey reported that their main motivation for applying for SSF was to carry out habitat actions to address either the need to restore or create specific habitats in their local area (10/18). As illustrated in Figure 2.1., the scale of funding was also an important factor, with a third of grantees who answered this survey question (33%; 6/18) citing that the availability of large-scale capital enabled the delivery of action on a landscape scale.

'This level of funding was an excellent opportunity to take on vital large scale capital works that otherwise would have been delivered piecemeal, on a smaller scale or permanently dropped.' **(Wave 1 survey response)**

Alignment with organisational objectives or strategies was also a driver for several grantees to apply, with a third of respondents (6/18) giving examples of where the SSF funding activity mirrored organisational goals in relation to people and nature or strategic plans, such as Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) or the mission documents of local nature partnerships. For five grantees, the SSF allowed them to build on work carried out through a previous project or to further develop an existing partnership.

Figure 2.1 What were your main motivations for applying for SSF?



Base: Wave 1 Survey (N=18).

The ability of the SSF to support a range of habitat activities on a landscape scale, with consideration for habitat connectivity and species recovery, was a key motivation for grantees. Three grantees specifically illustrated this. Habitats like rivers, as well as mixed habitats across a landscape scale, were often noted as being overlooked by other grant funding schemes, emphasising the value of the SSF. One grantee noted:

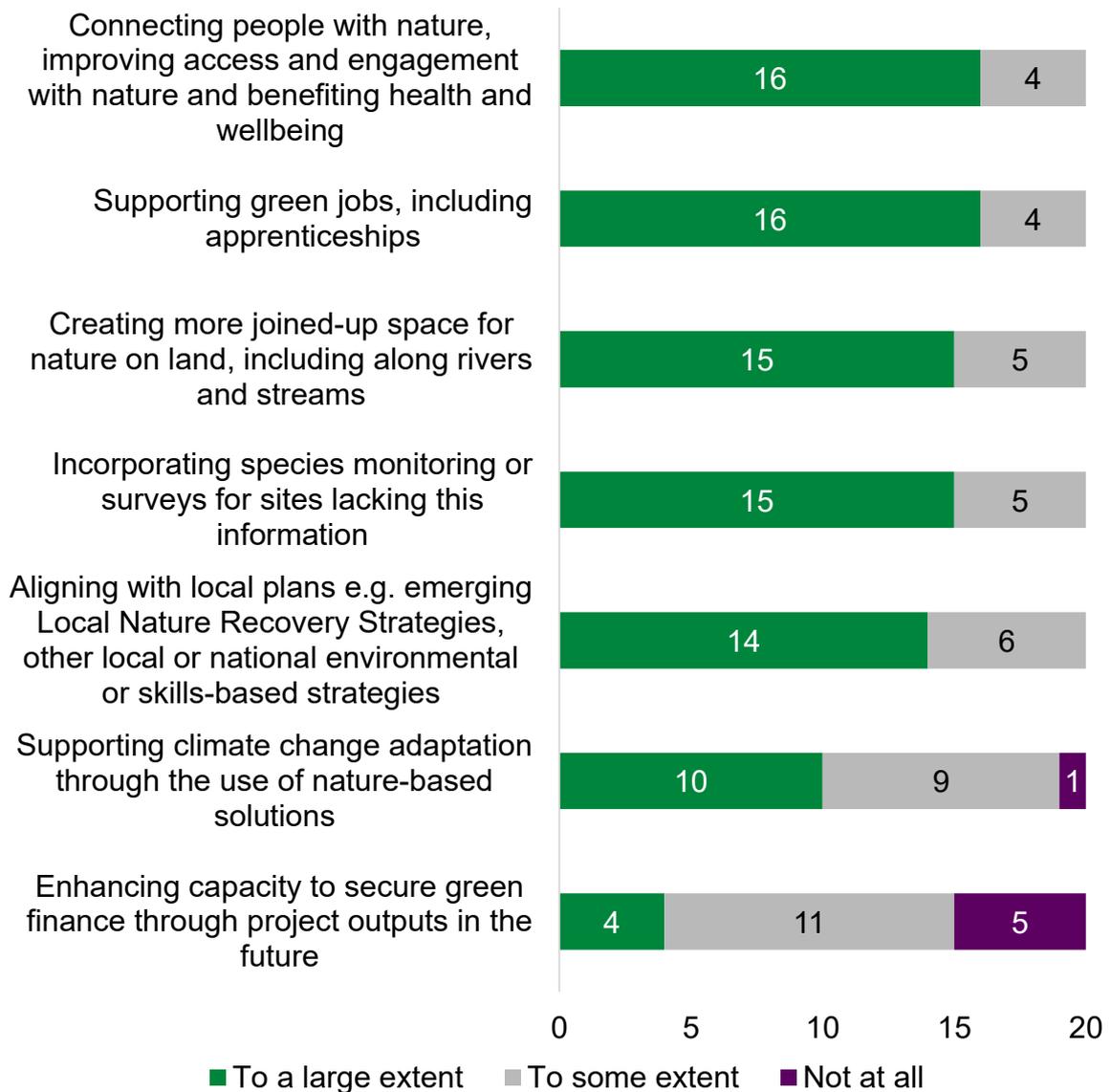
‘The SSF was particularly appealing as it supports river connectivity projects, such as fish passes, which have lacked funding. It also allowed us to bring together projects across a wide area under the shared goal of supporting priority species, unlike many funds that prefer single-location projects.’ **(Wave 1 survey response)**

Grantees also reported being motivated to apply for the SSF because of its focus on engaging people and communities with nature-based activity (4/18). The SSF is seen as enabling habitat work that involves local people and landowners, whilst also building on the efforts of committed volunteer groups,

‘SSF clearly stated interest in funding inclusive action for nature recovery that would engage communities with their landscape, including support for traineeships. This fits well with our organisational goals for people and for wildlife.’ **(Wave 1 survey response)**

In the Wave 1 Survey, grantees were asked to outline their projects' areas of focus in addition to the core SSF theme of creating and restoring habitats and reversing species decline. As shown in Figure 2.2, most grantees indicated a strong emphasis on connecting people with nature (16/20) and supporting green jobs within their projects (16/20). Enhancing habitat connectivity (15/20) and collecting data through species surveys and monitoring (15/20) also emerged as key areas of focus for project delivery. Grantee motivations and project aims indicate that all projects are well aligned with the SSF's additional priorities alongside its core theme.

Figure 2.2: To what extent does your project address the following themes?



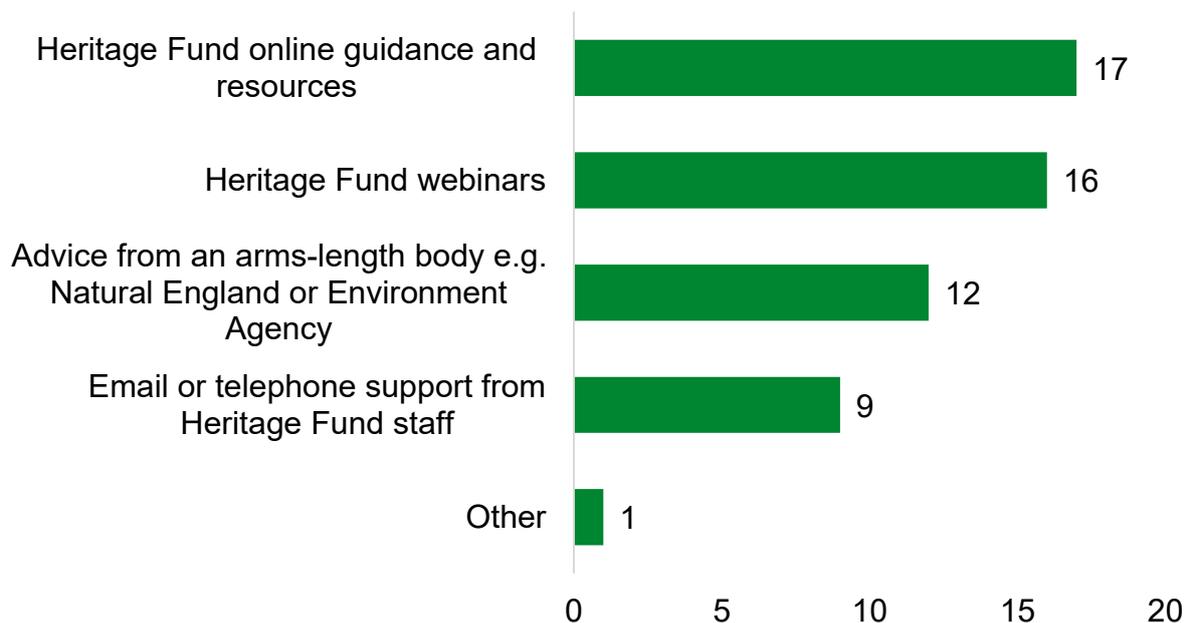
Base: Wave 1 Survey (N=20).

Most grantees reported that their projects are looking to enhance capacity to secure green finance. However, this focus appears to be less prominent compared to other themes identified above. It is possible that this has been less of a consideration for grantees in the early stages of project delivery, but will become more prominent over time, when grantees are developing project sustainability plans. Project sustainability and access to green finance will be explored in further detail in subsequent reporting. Detail on how projects are delivering against the core aim and priority themes are explored in more detail in Sections 2.2.2, 2.2.3 and 2.2.4.

2.1.2 Application Support

When making their application for SSF funding, 17 grantees reported using the Heritage Fund’s online guidance and resources. All but one project that responded to the Wave 1 Survey also attended a webinar delivered by the Heritage Fund (Figure 2.3 below). Nearly three-quarters of projects who answered this survey question also sought advice from an arms-length body such as Natural England or the Environment Agency (12/17) whilst just over half (9/17) received email or telephone advice from Heritage Fund staff. One project also noted using other support as part of their application, namely commissioning a bid writing specialist.

Figure 2.3: Which of the following forms of support did you use in making your application for grant funding?



Base: Wave 1 Survey (N=17).

Projects were positive about the support offered by the Heritage Fund, suggesting it was prompt and effective. Three projects commented on the useful responses to queries and clarifications. Several projects highlighted the usefulness of the webinars as well as the Q&A sessions,

‘The webinars were well timed and helpful, as well as responses to queries via the mailbox being responded to quickly. The webpage, portal and guidance documents were clearly set out, easily accessible/shareable and very helpful.’ **(Wave 1 survey response)**

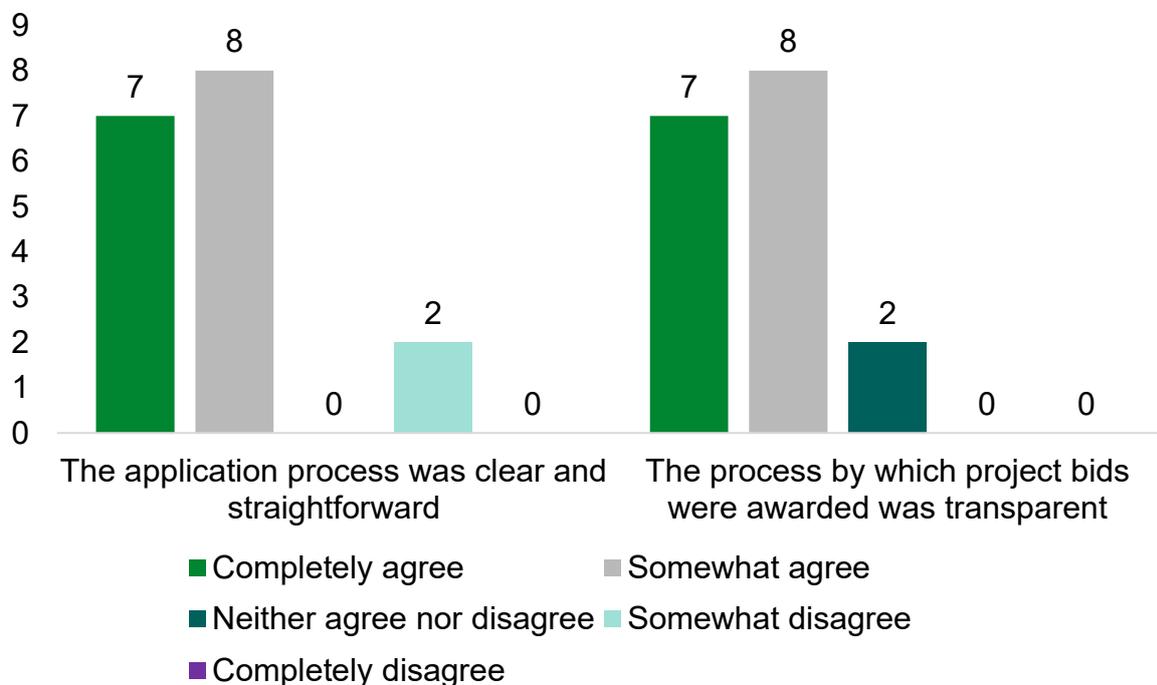
2.1.3 Application Reflections

Overall, grantees were positive about the application process, indicating that the process worked well. Figure 2.4 shows that most projects who responded to the survey agreed that the process was clear and straightforward (7/17 completely agreed, and 8/17 agreed). Amongst grantees, there was recognition that the process was proportionate to the level of grant being applied for and that guidance was clear.

‘The process was straightforward enough in terms of knowing timescales and signposting to the relevant guidance that was specific to this funding stream.’ **(Wave 1 survey response)**

Two projects somewhat disagreed that the process was clear and straightforward, citing examples of confusion over procurement, partnerships, and the split between capital and revenue funding, as well as the volume and complexity of guidance notes and documents. These grantees were less familiar with the Heritage Fund’s typical application process than others. Additionally, grantees did acknowledge that subsequent support and guidance offered by the Heritage Fund helped them to overcome these challenges.

Figure 2.4 To what extent do you agree with the following statements?



Base: Wave 1 Survey (N=17).

The majority of grantees found the process through which bids were awarded to be transparent (7/17 completely agreed and 8/17 agreed). The remaining two grantees neither agreed nor disagreed that the process was transparent, with one noting they were not aware of the full process and therefore felt unable to comment. This reiterates that, overall, the Heritage Fund's application process for SSF was effective and clear, ensuring that most grantees felt supported throughout the process.

Suggested Improvements

Grantees were asked if there were any improvements that could be made to the application process. Most commonly, 5 grantees reported that they would have benefited from a longer timescale for the full application. These grantees suggested that having an application window longer than nine weeks would have allowed them to better and more accurately plan their project detail and engage prospective partners.

'More time for preparing larger bids, particularly those involving multiple partners would have been helpful.' **(Wave 1 survey response)**

'The timescale for completing the main application was far too short...which even with oven ready projects was not long enough to accurately plan and cost the application.' **(Wave 1 survey response)**

Whilst it is understandable that grantees may wish for more time to develop a detailed application, it is also important to consider that extending the application period could lead to applicants overcommitting resources, despite no guarantee of success. Given the generally positive feedback on the current application process, and the risks associated with increased effort, application timelines should likely be retained for future similar programmes.

Four grantees noted that their applications would have benefitted from additional detail regarding the SSF at the outset, for example match funding requirements. However, grantees also acknowledged that the Heritage Fund provided additional information when it was requested. In addition, grantees acknowledged that the scale and nature of the funding inevitably led to the evolution of some aspects of the guidance and this was viewed positively.

2.2 Delivery Progress

Section Summary

- Initial implementation of projects was successful overall, with all projects making progress on delivery.
- Grantees attributed early successes to effective partnership working and the establishment of good project management/governance processes. A key factor in this has been the creation of mixed teams that include staff from different levels and job roles, from ecologists to rangers to green finance specialists. This has supported effective project set up and contributed to learning and capacity building.

- Early challenges identified by grantees through the survey and workshops range from seasonality and adverse weather, the procurement of contractors, increases in costs, and delays to securing landowner and statutory consents. Challenges have been mitigated through adjustments to the sequencing of activities, engagement with contractors or statutory bodies to resolve issues, or making use of pre-planned contingency finances or time.

This sub-section, informed by project monitoring data, the Wave 1 Survey and project staff workshops, explores how project activities have progressed so far, including whether any planned activity to restore, create or manage habitats has been completed.

2.2.1 Overview

Findings from both the Wave 1 Survey and reflective workshops indicate that project delivery is progressing well. Most grantees (18/20) reported that, since their bid was approved, they have been able to set up their projects as expected. Where grantees noted good progress, this was commonly due to having established project and resourcing plans and partnership working arrangements prior to being awarded funding. This allowed grantees to start quickly and effectively,

‘With agreeable landowners and a strong project management system in place that we were able to implement straight away. With a mix of existing and new staff, we were not waiting to recruit key team members and so our team was able to start work immediately. We also planned our [project] to begin with [activity] expected to have fewer challenges, enabling quicker delivery. [...] Similarly, for engagement activities, we had a clear plan and identified relevant community groups in advance, allowing us to quickly start engaging people.’ **(Wave 1 survey response)**

Insights from reflective workshops with projects provide further detail on the early stages of delivery. Most projects have progressed into delivery, following initial groundwork activity. Several reported completing key phases of habitat work over the autumn and winter months, including tree and hedge planting, tree felling, the removal of non-native species, and the introduction of grazing management approaches. These early interventions have also been linked to longer-term sustainability aims, such as woodland restructuring and the reversion of arable land. Volunteer engagement has also been important in this phase of work across projects.

Key enablers to and challenges faced in progressing project delivery across the 20 projects are summarised below, with further detail provided in subsequent thematic sections.

Enablers for Effective Project Delivery

Partnership working has played a central role in successful project delivery to date and has helped achieve a wide range of objectives by combining expertise, resources, and local connections (see also Section 2.2.3). Reflective workshops highlighted the value of these collaborative approaches.

Many projects relied on long standing relationships with local partners, including charities, landowners and community conservation groups, to launch activities quickly and build trust with key stakeholders. This proved especially important for projects involving land negotiations or working across dispersed rural areas.

‘A key success has been the partnership with a local hay producer. He understands the project’s aims and sees that rewilding can produce an economic product, demonstrating that it is possible to work with farmers in a way that are both environmentally and economically beneficial. One of the biggest achievements of the project so far has been proving that this kind of mutually beneficial partnership can succeed’ (**Reflective workshop response**)

Volunteer and community engagement has also played a key role in establishing and advancing project delivery, particularly in grassland, heathland, woodland and river restoration activities (see also Section 2.2.4). Volunteers provided essential hands-on support, including removing invasive species, laying hedges and participating in habitat surveys, which helped reduce the workload for the core project teams and reallocate budget for other project activities.

‘Volunteers have been incredibly valuable to the work we are doing. Given the short timeframe of the project, their involvement gives me hope that there will be continued engagement, monitoring, and maintenance beyond the project’s end’ (**Reflective workshop response**)

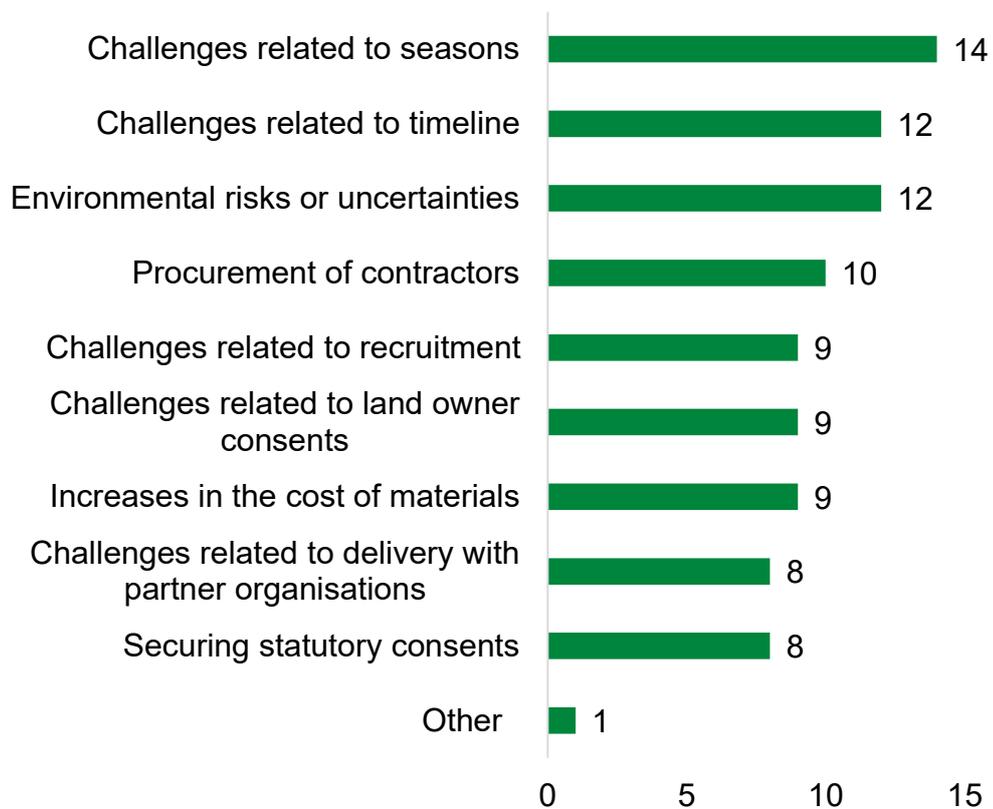
Across project types, the effective and timely delivery of capital works and habitat improvements has also helped to advance project delivery (see also Section 2.2.2). These works underpin many of the programme’s most visible environmental impacts to date, with activities ranging from woodland diversification, grassland restoration and wetland creation to the installation of water management infrastructure and improved connectivity for priority species.

Grantees commonly reported that effective governance structures, including project boards and clear communication channels, were essential to advancing their projects. A key strength was the formation of mixed teams that brought together staff from different levels within organisations, including senior managers, project officers, ecologists, rangers, and green finance specialists. These teams have supported effective project set up and contributed to ongoing learning and capacity building.

Challenges Faced in Progressing Project Delivery

Whilst most projects have made good progress to date, several delivery challenges have emerged across the portfolio. As shown in Figure 2.5, the most frequently reported issue was the impact of seasonal constraints e.g. high rainfall and other adverse weather. Grantees noted that challenges associated with the procurement of contractors (10/20) and recruitment (9/20) had contributed to delays. Detail of key challenges is provided below.

Figure 2.5: Has your project experienced any of the following challenges?



Base: Wave 1 Survey (N=20).

Seasonality and adverse weather has been one of the key challenges for projects, with 14 grantees within the Wave 1 Survey and many projects within reflective workshops reporting issues linked to seasonal constraints (see also Section 2.2.2.). Activities such as planting, habitat works, and river restoration often depend on narrow seasonal windows, meaning delays, particularly early in the project delivery, can lead to missed opportunities to implement and deliver project activity as planned, compressing project timelines. Several projects also reported that project activity was affected by wet and stormy weather in autumn 2024, which made site access difficult, impacting activity timelines. In response, many projects prioritised time-sensitive tasks, rescheduled or swapped activities where possible, and in some cases gathered baseline data in advance to prepare for future delivery phases.

‘The window of time we have had is 18 months, which is quite a tight timeline when you are dealing with nature - things are seasonal, affected by weather, with delays you could end up missing a whole breeding season’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

Securing suitable contractors has been a common challenge, resulting in delays across many projects (see Section 2.2.3). The availability of qualified local contractors, particularly those with specialist skills in wetland creation, river restoration, or ecological monitoring, was limited. Several projects struggled to attract interest in tenders, with some receiving no responses. This issue was particularly acute for smaller scale or lower budget contracts, where local providers were often unavailable or unable to compete with lower quotes from larger national providers. Some teams also reported that contractors with the right expertise were already operating at capacity, reducing their willingness to take on smaller or more complex work.

High demand for contractors across the sector, when combined with rising labour and material costs, has made it difficult for a minority of grantees to obtain competitive quotes. In some cases, this has prevented projects from meeting the Heritage Fund requirement to secure three quotes, especially in rural or remote areas with a limited supplier base.

Increased costs have resulted in further challenges for some projects. For example, two projects reported that they have requested permission from the Heritage Fund to use their project's inflationary allowance in order to remain within budget. Others scaled back planned feasibility studies as material and consultancy costs exceeded expectations, redirecting resources to more deliverable elements. Within workshops, project staff suggested that they have mitigated the pressures of rising costs in several ways, including securing additional funding outside of SSF, building contingency into budgets, and front-loading capital works early in the delivery phase.

Grantees and project staff have commonly reported delays to delivery due to challenges in securing landowner permissions and statutory consents. Regulatory and planning processes, such as obtaining planning permission or approvals from the Environment Agency, Forestry Commission, and local authorities, were often time consuming and contributed to delays.

Negotiations with landowners, particularly where projects took place on land not owned by the delivery organisation, have also created barriers (see also Section 2.2.3). Whilst several projects have faced only minor delays, others have required considerable time and resource to secure access. In certain cases, landowners were reluctant to grant permission due to misunderstandings about the nature of the restoration work or concerns about perceived links to government led conservation initiatives.

'Getting permission from landowners has been incredibly challenging. There is a belief among some landowners that recent flooding in [local area] is caused by conservation bodies deliberately breaching riverbanks to boost biodiversity. We have had to spend a lot of time explaining that this is not the case and clarifying what is actually happening' **(Reflective workshop response)**

Where future programmes aim to fund ambitious projects, such as those delivered at a landscape scale, delivery timescales should be extended to a minimum of three years, with a clearly defined project planning phase. This will provide grantees with sufficient time to implement activity, recognising the inherent challenges of environmental project delivery, including landowner permissions, statutory consents and adverse weather conditions. A longer timeframe will also help to ensure a fair and equitable approach is taken to funding ambitious projects, avoiding an advantage for organisations with the capacity and resources to initiate delivery prior to the award of funding.

Resistance to habitat action was sometimes also reflected in local communities, where trust in conservation efforts was lower. Several projects noted that misinformation had shaped public perceptions, making early engagement, clear communication, and trust building essential.

2.2.2 Benefits to Nature

Sub-Section Summary

- Monitoring information demonstrated that 14 projects had already completed 147 planned habitat activities, showing that effective project set up and early delivery of action on habitats has been possible despite the challenges reported.
- Benefits to nature so far include the planting of 6,138 broadleaf trees and 454 small-scale actions such as the installation of bird boxes and pond creation. Delivery of habitat action is being led primarily by contractors, who are undertaking just over half (51%) of capital works or actions reflecting the specialist or technical nature of the works. Project staff are delivering nearly a quarter (23%) of these activities directly, whilst the remaining activity is delivered by volunteers (13%), project partners and landowners (9%) and through engagement activities e.g. school visits (5%).
- Survey data highlights how creating joined up spaces for nature has been a key focus for projects. This has been done through strategic site selection, the removal of barriers such as fences and creating 'linking' habitats such as 'stepping stone' grassland habitats for pollinators or ponds to develop 'wet' corridors.

This sub-section outlines how project activity, which aims to benefit nature, has progressed so far. Please note that definitions of habitat creation, restoration and management can be found in Annex B.

Habitat Creation, Restoration and Management

The majority of projects have made good progress in delivering their planned habitat creation, restoration and management activities. At the time of responding to the Wave 1 survey, over half of grantees (11/20) reported that they had been able to deliver planned habitat creation, restoration or management actions to a large extent. Notably, no grantees reported being unable to deliver these activities, indicating that habitat work is progressing across all projects, despite identified delays and project delivery adaptations.

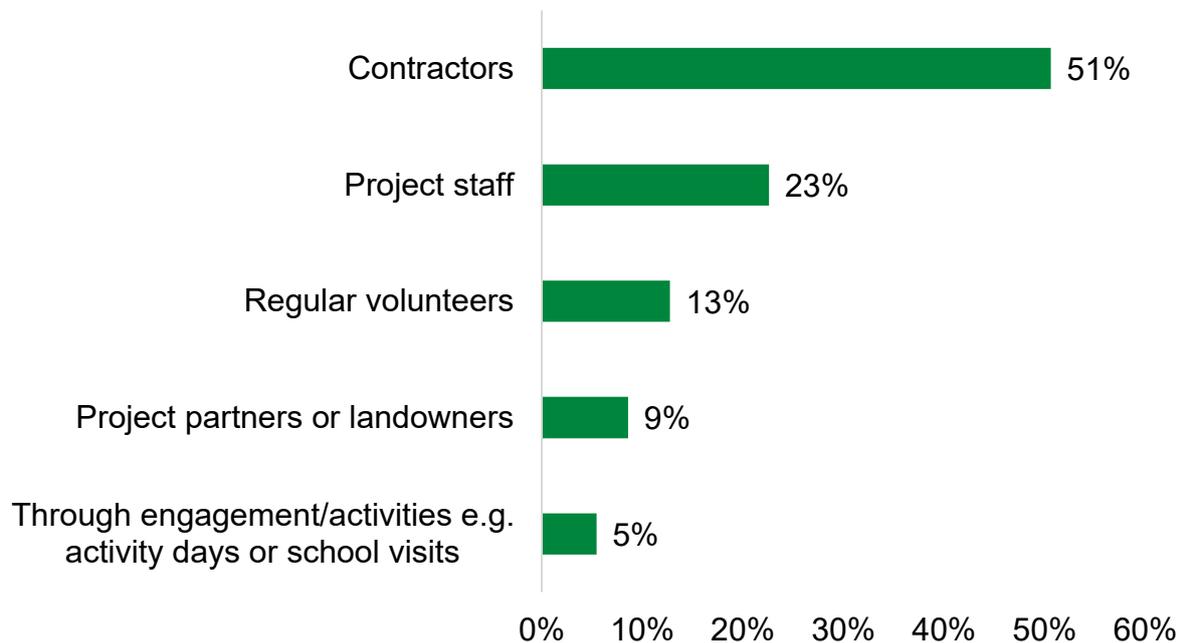
By January 2025, 14 of the 20 projects that responded to the survey question had already completed some planned habitat activity, showing that early delivery was possible despite the challenges reported. In many cases, this is due to the prompt and effective delivery of capital works projects. All projects were either very or quite confident that their work would result in high quality habitats. The likely impact of this activity is explored in further detail in Section 3. The six remaining projects indicated that they had experienced delays in their planned habitat activity due to the aforementioned challenges in Section 2.2.1 e.g., challenges associated with seasonal constraints and the procurement of contractors.

Reflecting on the delivery of capital works and habitat action, project staff reported that this work was made feasible by the timely distribution of SSF funding. By providing upfront investment, the SSF has enabled projects to pursue restoration activities that would not have been feasible through fragmented or short-term funding streams. This was especially evident in river, wetland, and coastal environments, where aligning works with seasonal windows is important. Many ecological processes, such as animal breeding cycles, plant flowering periods, and hibernation patterns, are tied to specific seasons, making certain times of the year more suitable for carrying out actions (e.g. for planting, fish migration improvements, or grazing trials).

‘Having that huge cash injection has been so welcome, and it is so different from how other schemes are usually funded, which is piecemeal, year by year. It has been really nice to see things come towards completion, with big chunks of the river system and floodplain now hopefully in much better condition’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

As shown in Figure 2.6 below, delivery of habitat action is being led primarily by contractors, who are undertaking just over half (51%) of capital works or actions. This reflects the specialist nature of much of the work and the need for technical capacity, particularly for complex interventions. Project staff are delivering nearly a quarter (23%) of these activities directly, while volunteers contribute 13%, showing the importance of community involvement.

Figure 2.6: What proportion of any capital works or actions to improve habitats is being undertaken by the following?



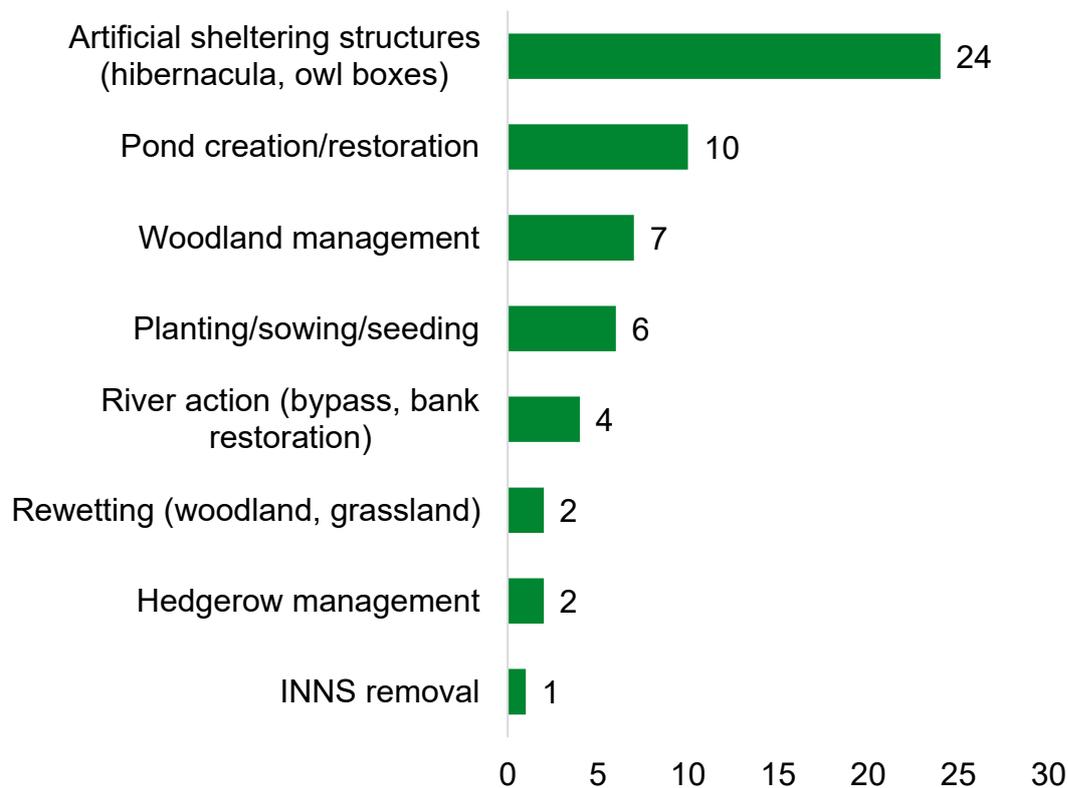
Base: Wave 1 Survey (N=20).

Tree Planting and Small Scale Actions

Projects delivered a broad mix of practical interventions to create and restore habitats. Tree planting was a key method used to improve woodland and riparian habitats. Across four projects, a total of 6,138 broadleaf trees have been planted, which contributed to the establishment of wildlife corridors, particularly where projects aimed to buffer existing habitats or extend woodland edge habitats to benefit a wider range of species.

At this interim stage, nine projects have undertaken small scale habitat actions, which have played a complementary role in overall habitat management. Monitoring data includes 56 small scale action records, comprising 454 actions across the nine projects. Notably, 43% of these records involved the creation or restoration of wildlife-rich habitat. As shown in Figure 2.7 below, a wide range of actions were implemented, including the installation of artificial structures (e.g., owl boxes, hibernacula), pond restoration, and selective woodland management.

Figure 2.7: Small scale action records by type



Base: Wave 1 Monitoring information (N=56).

Details of the small scale actions suggest that projects are embedding long-term sustainability into project design by establishing low maintenance, resilient habitats. Many noted that this involves using infrastructure that supports natural processes, alongside management to maintain ecological value over time. For example, wetland projects are installing features such as channels to guide water flow and encourage the regrowth of wetland vegetation. Grassland projects are using features such as fencing to manage grazing or control livestock, and in several cases, sites are being left to re-vegetate naturally once the basic conditions are in place with management to maintain their health.

‘We try and restore habitats that are low maintenance and can be managed periodically but are still durable. Habitats also need to be adapted to each site - some ponds just drain away straight away because it is too sandy, so that has also been a key consideration.’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

A common approach used by wetland and coastal projects to restore and create habitats has been the development and improvement of wetland features such as ponds, reedbeds, and water channels, with some projects reporting visible ecological responses within months. More detail on this is provided within Section 3.4.

Site management plans are a key part of many project habitat activities. Whilst not all sites had plans in place at the outset, most projects reported that formal site management plans are now being developed or updated, and in many cases these plans are a final project deliverable.

Habitat Connectivity

A key aspect of the SSF is delivering actions to improve habitat connectivity, recognising the importance of ecological networks to enable species to move. This is encapsulated by the Lawton Principles for wildlife that is ‘bigger, better, and more joined up’. As shown in Figure 2.2 (Section 2.2.1), 18 out of 20 SSF projects are creating joined up spaces for nature on land, including along rivers and streams to a large extent, with the remaining two projects doing so to some extent.

SSF-funded actions have sought to create joined up space for nature in a range of ways, either by taking direct action to improve connectivity or indirectly through prioritising actions on sites in strategic locations for priority habitats. Several project staff noted developing ‘stepping stones’ of habitats to benefit species extent and abundance of pollinators and birds, such as creating grassland ‘edge’ habitats on agricultural land, or woodland creation work to connect isolated pockets of woodland. For example, one project focused on expanding and linking woodland habitats was guided by mapping and input from project partners. This includes identifying under-recognised habitat types and using SSF investment to raise awareness and expand these ecosystems.

‘To choose the sites, we used high-quality habitat mapping produced by ourselves and [partner], which highlighted opportunities to improve and connect existing [woodland] areas.’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

Another approach to habitat connectivity has been to remove barriers that may prevent the movement of species, such as the removal of fences. In addition, some have established ‘linking features’ to support the movement of species or to extend habitats. In wetland habitats, a few projects have installed ponds to link water bodies or have installed dams to maintain ‘wet’ corridors. Delivering action on linear habitats such as rivers was also key to creating more joined up space for nature, supporting not only the movement of freshwater species within rivers but also along riparian corridors and floodplains.

‘The majority of our new scrapes and gripes have been connected to our existing wetland system. This means that we will be able to control the water levels in these features across the reserve. The gripes and ditches also connect other features such as ponds and scrapes which has created larger wetland networks and systems.’ **(Wave 1 survey response)**

‘All our capital work is centred around [...] rivers and their floodplain and so naturally...provides that landscape connection. Freshwater species will be able to move more freely along these rivers and access new wetland territories previously unmanaged, unconnected or non-existent!’ **(Wave 1 survey response)**

Project staff working in wetland habitats also reflected on the importance of restoring riparian corridors to support habitat connectivity during workshops. A key part of this has involved the management of invasive species, such as Himalayan balsam and Japanese knotweed, which often degrade native habitats. By tackling invasive species, projects are aiming to facilitate the regrowth of native vegetation, ensuring that riparian corridors remain able to support a wide range of species.

‘We are focusing on reconnecting four flood plains which will be about 50 hectares and creating 5 hectares of habitat within that. As part of this we have a removing invasive species element such as Himalayan balsam, Japanese knotweed, Giant Hogweed, and continued mink control.’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

Further supporting species movement, one project has focused on the removal of weirs and other barriers to fish migration, with the aim of helping to open up access to upstream spawning grounds and also benefit other species such as crayfish,

‘The removal of the weir is expected to have a significant impact on local wildlife. It will improve habitat connectivity for fish and crayfish, opening up access to upstream spawning grounds and allowing a wider range of species to thrive and reproduce.’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

Some projects have sought this connectivity by developing networks of farmers, landowners and partners to coordinate habitat action on a landscape scale. This is particularly important when taking a mosaic approach, with a variety of different habitat types in close proximity designed to support a wide range of species. For example, one project noted:

‘The project will adopt a site-based mosaic habitat approach rather than focusing on a single species or habitat. Each of the sites has been looked at holistically to achieve the best outcome for species recovery through a mixed habitat approach.’ **(Wave 1 survey response)**

Reflecting on what worked well when delivering action to create joined up habitats, several project staff spoke of the benefits of landscape-scale restoration of natural processes. Having management or ownership of land was a key enabling factor in delivering successful habitat connectivity work. Developing good relationships and communication with other landowners and partners also supported this. Additionally, good relationships with contractors was noted as a key success for multiple projects:

‘For example, [some habitat activity] came in under budget, but the contractor worked with the site team to deliver extra habitat within the original budget and timeline, offering more habitat connectivity at the site.’ **(Wave 1 survey response)**

‘Bringing together multiple partner organisations all maintaining green space across [project area] will also help better connect their management going forward through complimentary management approaches.’ **(Wave 1 survey response)**

At the interim stage of the programme, several project staff reported that it was too soon to say what the challenges for developing habitat connectivity were, noting the range of further work planned on sites by the end of the programme. Challenges to connectivity that were identified at this stage aligned with the wider challenges for project delivery, including delays to licences or permissions and unforeseen weather conditions.

Two projects did not focus on habitat connectivity due to the nature of the habitats themselves, or challenges associated with landownership.

‘We live in a very patchy landscape, so there's not always the opportunity to link up with surrounding habitats e.g. when the land is completely surrounded by intensive farmland and the landowners are not responsive to discussion.’
(Wave 1 survey response)

2.2.3 Skills and Capacity Building

Sub-Section Summary

- The SSF programme has supported a total of 144 roles (108.6 Full-Time Equivalent) across England, including 21 traineeships/apprenticeships. Over half of the roles were newly created for the SSF (85 roles, 59%).
- In total, 291 staff members and 285 volunteers have participated in training to date, with nearly half (49%, 78/158) of these opportunities linked to a recognised qualification or certificate.
- Monitoring information suggests that 3,202 volunteers have contributed so far to the SSF, of which 675 (21%) were first-time volunteers.
- The Wave 1 Survey suggests that 55 organisations are formally supporting project delivery, with 14 out of 20 projects working in formal partnerships. The average rating for partnership collaboration was 4.1 out of 5, with all projects noting levels either 3 or above (where 5 is ‘very good’ collaboration).
- Nineteen out of 20 SSF projects have conducted habitat or species surveys, amounting to 1,059 individual completed surveys, with volunteers contributing heavily to this activity.

This sub-section explores a range of activity relating to skills and capacity building, including:

- The jobs created and retained through the delivery of projects, including the number of roles and Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) supported, and apprenticeships/trainees.
- The delivery of skill development opportunities across project partners, staff, apprenticeships/trainees, and volunteers.
- The contribution of volunteers to project activity, including effective approaches to volunteer engagement/retention and challenges encountered so far.
- Reflections on the successes and challenges of partnership working and engagement with landowners.

- Activity delivered towards monitoring and surveying for both habitats and species.

Jobs and Apprenticeships

Based on Wave 1 Monitoring information, the SSF programme supported a total of 144 roles (108.6 FTE) across 19 organisations. Of the 144 supported roles:

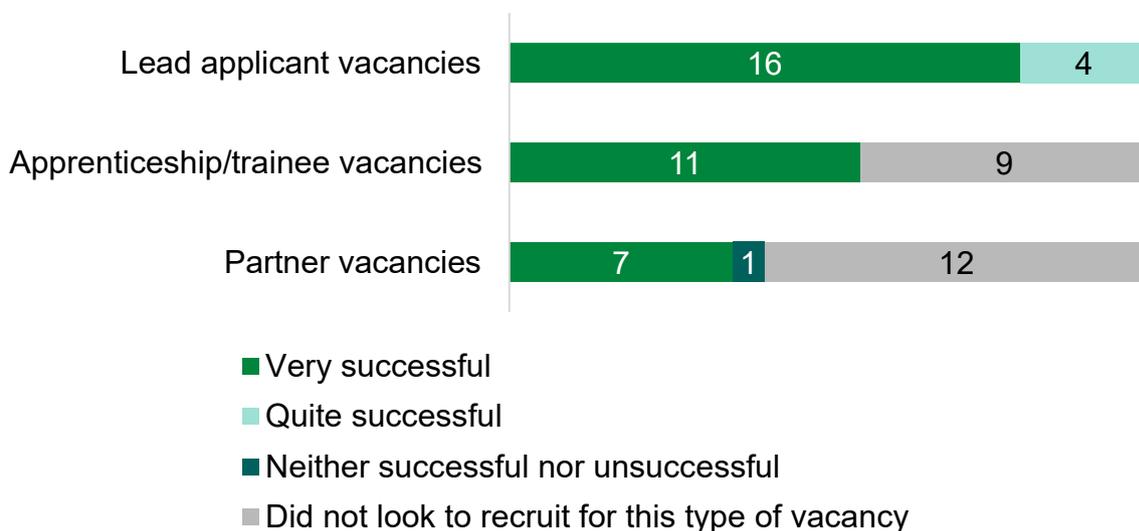
- 85 roles (59%) were newly created, and
- 59 roles (41%) involved the retention of existing staff.

Please note that due to data incompleteness within the Monitoring information it has not been possible to include 'Full Cost Recovery' (FCR) roles in the interim analysis. FCR roles will be reviewed in the final report.

Of the newly created roles, 14 were traineeships and 6 were apprenticeships, with one existing apprentice retained because of SSF.

As shown in Figure 2.8 below, all lead applicants recruited for roles to support SSF project delivery. As a result, nearly four in five (79%) roles were employed by the project lead organisations, and 20% were employed by partners. While no major recruitment difficulties were reported in the Wave 1 Survey, some challenges were highlighted during the reflective workshops. In particular, several project teams noted that the short-term nature of contracts made it more difficult to attract suitable candidates. However, most projects reported that they were ultimately able to recruit the necessary staff, although the process often took longer than anticipated.

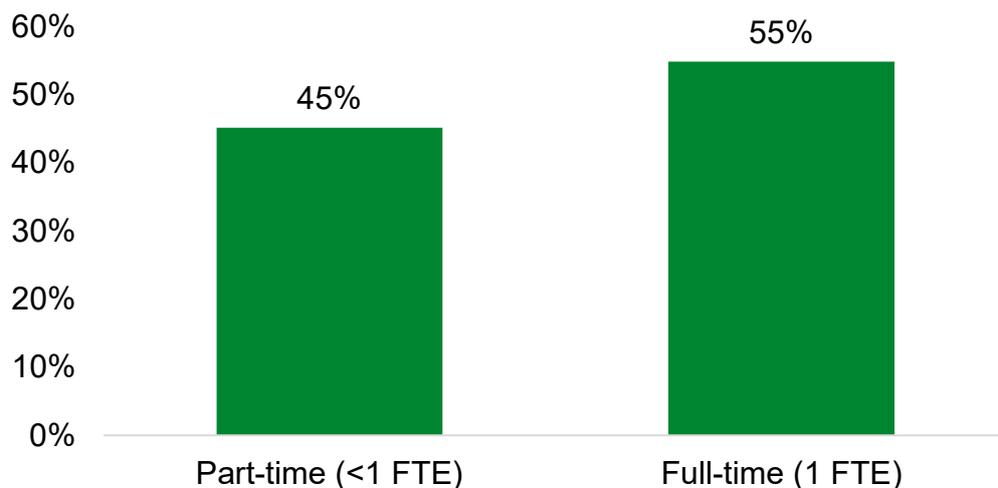
Figure 2.8: How successful has project recruitment been so far?



Base: Wave 1 Survey (N=20).

The majority of roles (55%) supported through the SSF are full-time roles (Figure 2.9 below). Over three quarters (76%) of these full-time roles were newly created, compared to around a quarter of part-time roles created (24%). This suggests that the SSF has enabled organisations to substantially increase their capacity.

Figure 2.9: Proportion of full-time and part-time roles supported

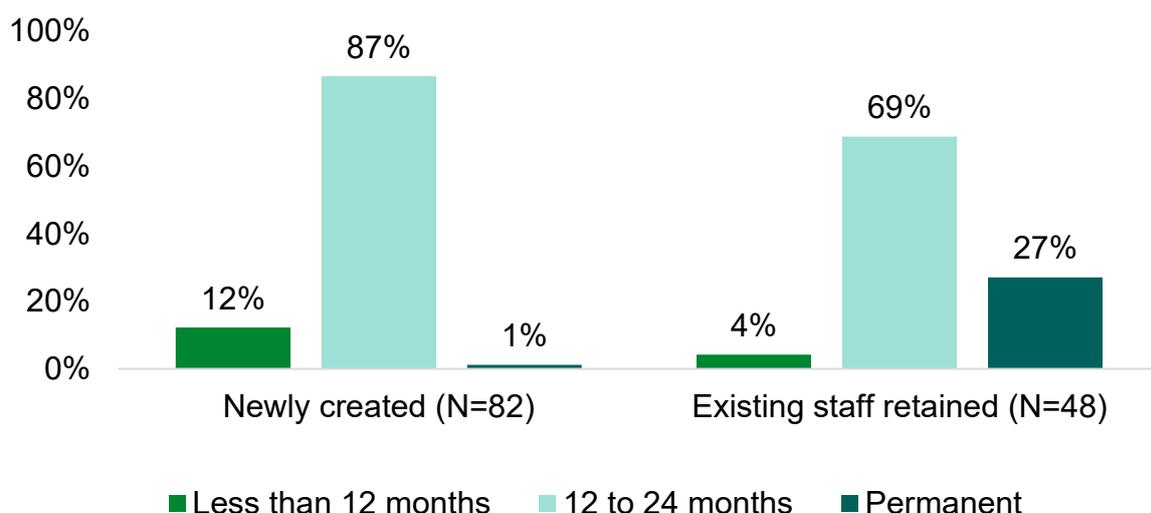


Base: Wave 1 Monitoring information (N=142). Please note that information was missing for 2 roles.

Figure 2.10 over page shows that most newly created roles are fixed-term contracts aligned with the SSF project delivery period, with nearly 9 in 10 positions (87%) contracted for between 12 and 24 months. It is notable that only one of the 85 newly created roles was a permanent contract.

This suggests that while the programme has expanded organisational capacity during the funding period, many of these jobs may not be retained following the end of the programme. This will be further explored in the final phase of reporting to understand the long-term impacts on organisational capacity and the retention of staff knowledge and expertise.

Figure 2.10: Employment duration by type of role

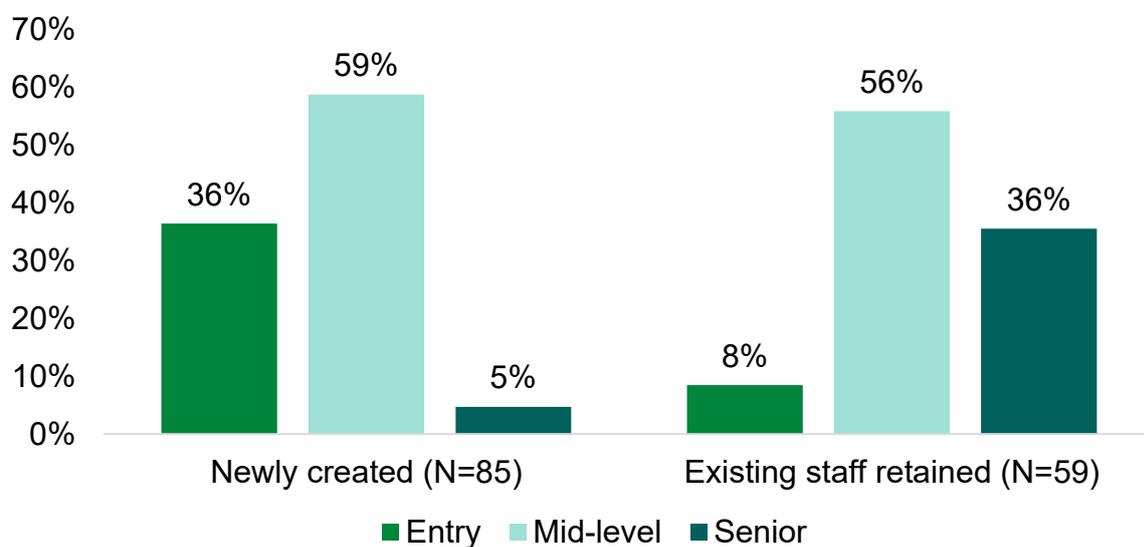


Base: Wave 1 Monitoring information (N=131). Please note that information was missing for 14 roles.

Figure 2.11 below that the majority of both newly created and retained roles were mid-level positions (59% and 56%, respectively). This likely reflects the finite programme timescales, which may have necessitated recruiting staff with existing project management skills, rather than investing in the development of more junior employees. However, it is important to recognise that the SSF is still supporting a considerable number of entry-level opportunities (38).

Within reflective workshops, some projects shared approaches to supporting new entry-level recruits, including using a two week pre-recruitment course to provide training and insight into trainee ranger roles. This allowed applicants to better understand the job and helped organisations understand candidates' strengths and was thought to support the retention of trainees.

Figure 2.11: Role level by type of role



Base: Wave 1 Monitoring information (N=144).

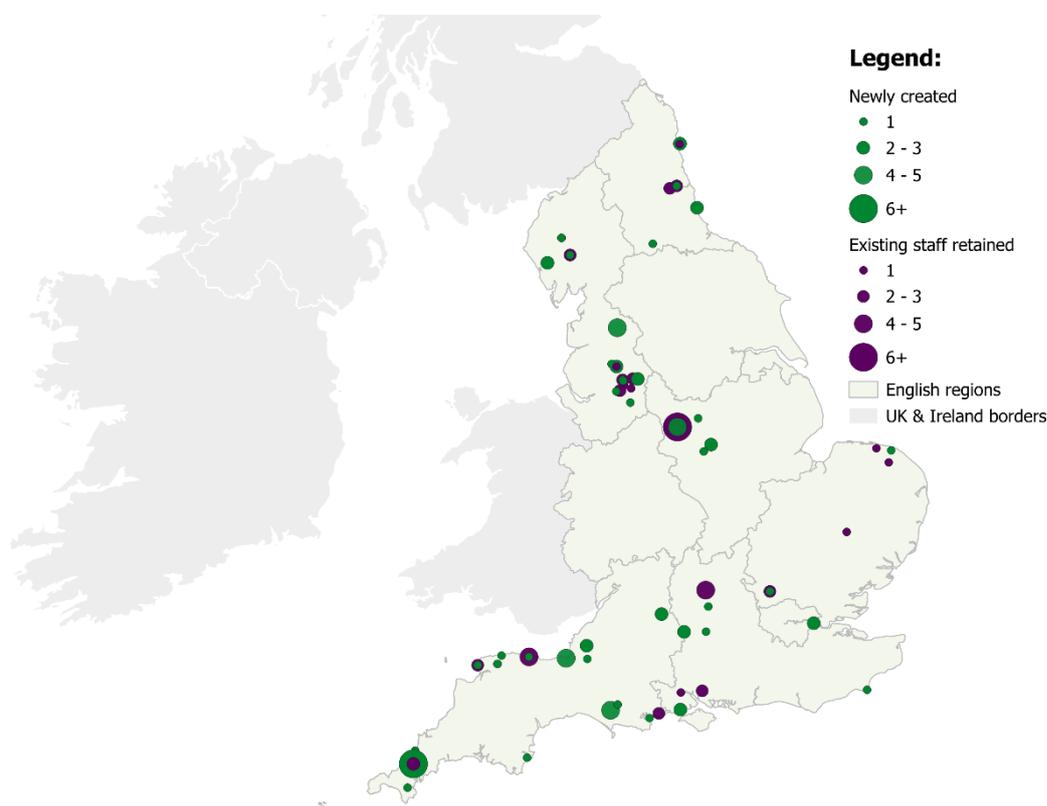
The SSF has supported employment opportunities across England (Table 2.1 below and Figure 2.12 over page), with jobs supported across all regions other than the East Midlands, Greater London, Yorkshire and the Humber, reflecting the location of funded projects. The South West region supports the highest number of roles overall (46), followed by the North West (40). The SFF also supports six remote roles where clear regional attribution was not possible.

Table 2.1: Roles supported by region

Region	Role newly created	Existing staff retained	Total	% of total roles supported
South West	29	12	41	28%
North West	20	20	40	28%
East Midlands	9	7	16	11%
South East	7	9	16	11%
North East	8	5	13	9%
East of England	5	6	11	8%
Remote	6	0	6	4%
Unclear	1	0	1	1%
N	85	59	144	100%

Base: Wave 1 Monitoring information.

Figure 2.12: Roles supported mapped



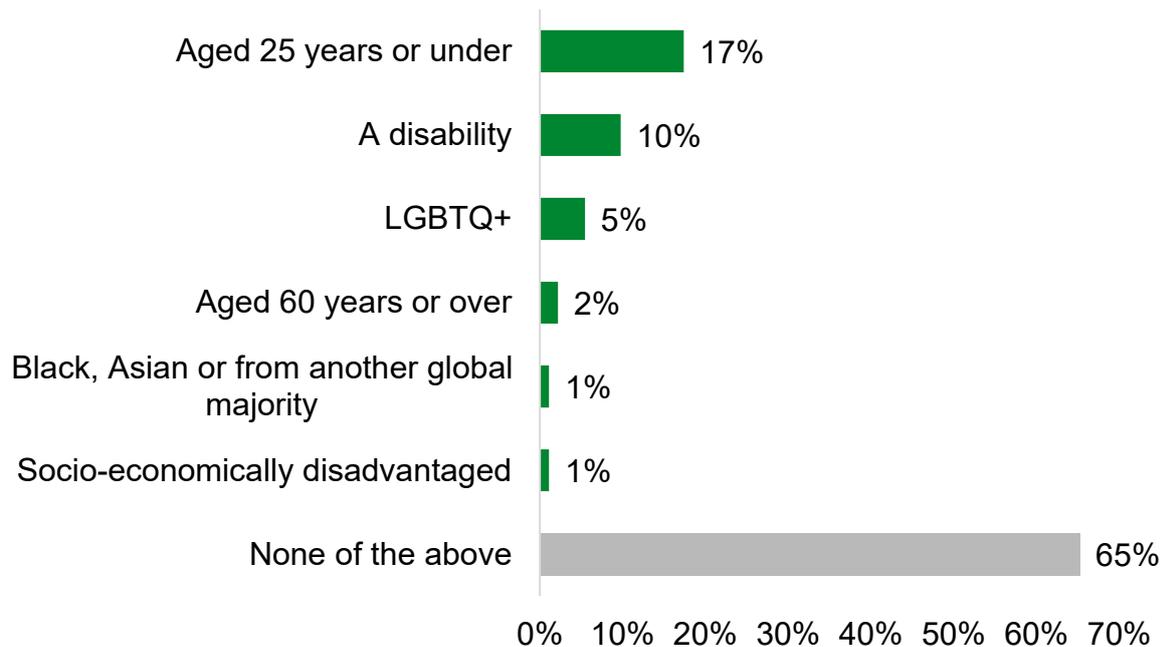
Base: Wave 1 Monitoring information (N=137). Please note that location data for 7 roles was unavailable.

Where roles have been supported by the SSF, it is expected that grantees will provide demographic information for individuals in those roles to the Heritage Fund and the programme evaluators. Currently, demographic monitoring data is available for 62% of roles (92 out of 144). In cases where data is not available, this is typically

due to grantees being unable to share the information externally or individuals choosing not to disclose it. To support a comprehensive analysis of equalities data in the final phase of the evaluation, the programme evaluators will work with the Heritage Fund and grantees to explore alternative approaches to data collection.

Figure 2.13 demonstrates that, based on available data, 17% of supported roles (16/92) were filled by individuals aged 25 or under, indicating success in engaging younger workers. However, other demographic groups appear to be substantially underrepresented. For example, just 1% (1/92) of roles were filled by individuals from Black, Asian, or global majority backgrounds, and the same proportion by those from socio-economically disadvantaged (i.e. disadvantaged as a result of class or income) groups.

Figure 2.13: Equalities data



Base: Wave 1 Monitoring information (N=92). Please note that percentages do not add up to 100% as individuals can belong to more than one demographic group.

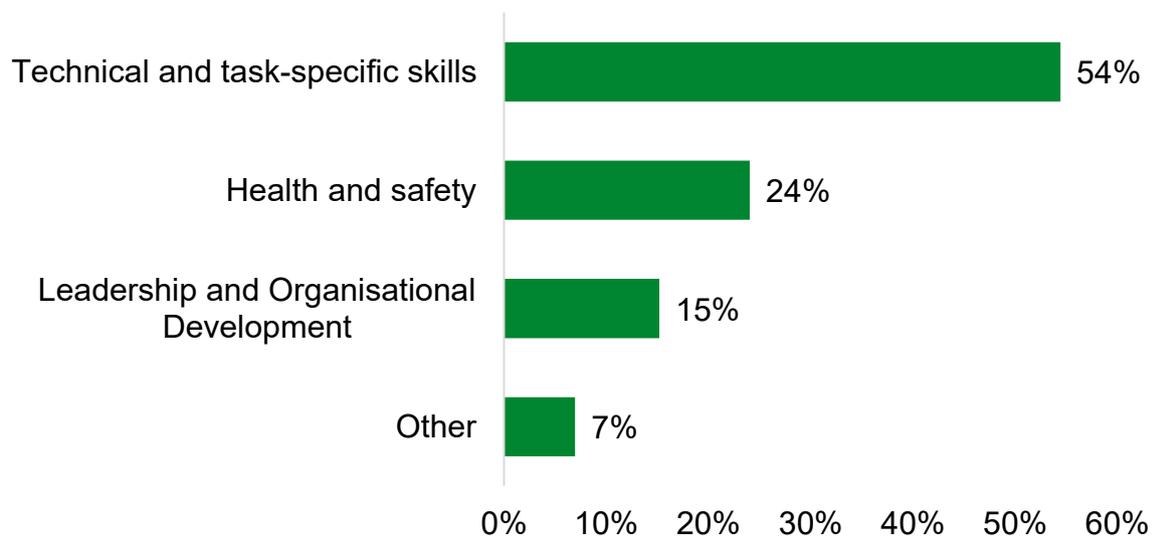
Skill Development

Based on Monitoring information, 15 out of 20 SSF projects have delivered training opportunities to staff and/or volunteers. In total, 291 staff members and 285 volunteers have participated in training, with nearly half (49%, 78/158) of these opportunities linked to a recognised qualification or certificate. Examples include Carbon Literacy certification, First Aid at Work, and LANTRA-accredited training for tool and vehicle use.

Figure 2.14 over page illustrates that the majority of training (54%, 85/158) focused on technical and task-specific skills. This encompassed areas such as surveying, species identification, safe operation of vehicles (e.g. all-terrain vehicles, tractors) and tools (e.g. chainsaws, brush cutters), use of hazardous substances including pesticides, and practical conservation tasks such as small tree felling and leaky dam construction.

Health and safety training (24%, 38/158) included various forms of first aid (basic, outdoor, and mental health), safeguarding for adults and children, and general health and safety and fire safety training. Training in leadership and organisational development (15%, 24/158) covered areas such as volunteer management, equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), and administrative and Human Resources processes, including recruitment.

Figure 2.14: Training opportunities by type



Base: Wave 1 Monitoring information (N=158).

Within reflective workshops, some project staff described forming teams that combined entry-level staff with more experienced colleagues. This approach enabled experienced staff to support the development of newer team members, who were then able to take on greater responsibilities over time. As a result, pressure on more experienced staff was reduced, helping to ease overall resource constraints:

‘What has been good is the ability to mix the funding going towards newer members of the team and funding current staff. This has enabled some really valuable cross-project learning. Some of the newer people who are less experienced in conservation have been able to learn from older members of staff which has created efficiencies and ensured things are keeping to timetable.’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

Staff and organisational development was influenced by access to partner expertise. Within workshops, project staff commonly reported being able to draw on the knowledge and experience of partners. Partnerships allowed staff to learn informally through peer support and knowledge sharing, which complemented more formal training. For example, one project explained that although staff lacked specialist knowledge in areas such as species identification and ecological monitoring, they were able to rely on partners with species classification expertise to fill these gaps and maintain the quality of delivery.

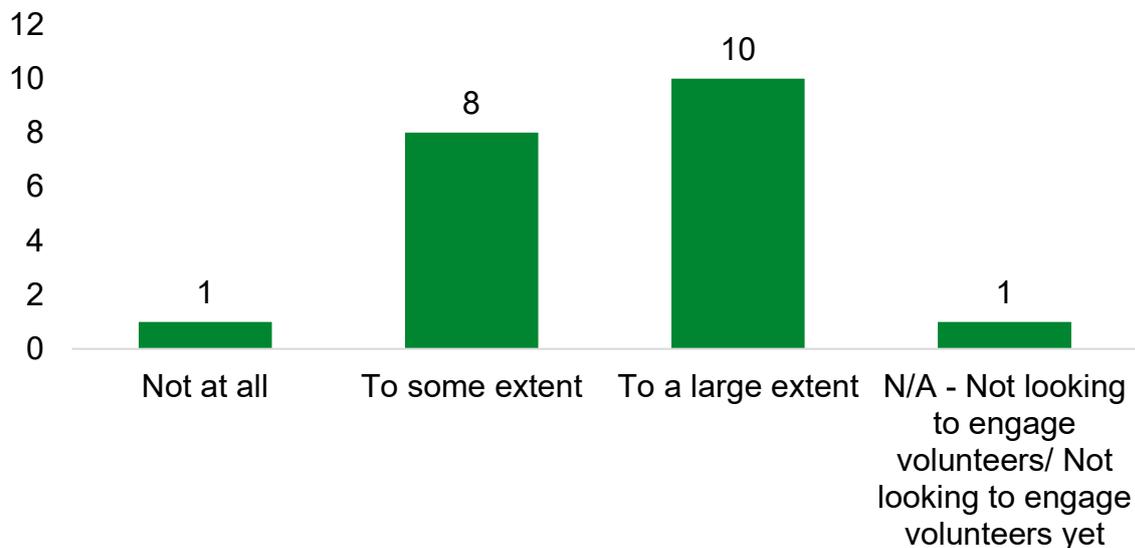
'[Partner] brings in-depth ecological knowledge while we provide access to sites where that expertise can be applied. Our team feels much more confident and upskilled - they are able to go out and identify [...] habitat, which was not the case before' **(Reflective workshop response)**

Volunteering

As illustrated in Figure 2.15 below, volunteers are a vital resource for projects to deliver their activities, with 18 projects engaging volunteers so far. Amongst these, one project is working with existing volunteers, three projects (17%) are engaging only new volunteers and the majority (78%; 14/18) are working with existing and new volunteers.

Monitoring information suggests that 3,202 volunteers have contributed so far to the SSF, of which 675 (21%) were first-time volunteers with an SSF delivery organisation. This demonstrates the extent to which projects are actively engaging with new volunteers and developing new activities to retain existing volunteers. This indicates a strong and resilient volunteer base, contributing to the capacity of funded organisations and supporting the long-term impact and sustainability of the project activity.

Figure 2.15: To what extent have you engaged volunteers in project delivery so far?



Base: Wave 1 Survey (N=20).

Responses to the Wave 1 Survey highlighted some of the approaches to engaging volunteers, such as developing relationships with existing organisations and community groups. For some projects, delivering activity in new locations or sites provided the opportunity to recruit individuals who were motivated to protect nature in their local area. Focusing on local, place-based activities was thought to help volunteers feel a personal connection to the activity.

‘Having new sites as part of the project has been useful for recruiting new volunteers who are local to the new sites and interested in getting involved. This is also true of having several different habitats across the project, with different volunteers interested in different sites and management techniques.’
(Wave 1 survey response)

Retaining and motivating existing volunteers was most successful with a dedicated staff resource to manage volunteers, according to several projects. Offering a range of engagement methods, including through both regular and one-off events, was also thought to support volunteer engagement, as well as a range of activities such as Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) control or surveying activity. Having distinct tasks where volunteers can see what they have achieved, and offering exciting tasks or opportunities were also thought to work well.

‘Having practical exciting tasks for volunteers to take part in e.g. planting up restored rivers and floodplains on private land they usually wouldn’t be able to access.’ **(Wave 1 survey response)**

Projects also highlighted the role of training opportunities as an effective approach to engage volunteers, particularly where skills gaps had been identified in relation to monitoring and site management tasks. For example, projects commonly offer Citizen Science-based training, such as river fly monitoring, with the aim of developing a volunteer skill base that can be sustained beyond the lifetime of the project. In some cases, adaptations to project delivery models due to staff resource have led to volunteers taking on more technical or skilled roles. Where originally planned contractor work was no longer feasible, for example, some projects opted to upskill volunteers to fill delivery gaps. This method was seen as a way to both address capacity issues and to engage and retain volunteers.

‘We had intended for contractors to deliver more technical work, but that is now being undertaken by volunteers. This has highlighted skills gaps, so we are now upskilling to fill those gaps. This change has been a benefit as we are building up skills within [organisation] that will allow us to manage these activities ourselves in the future’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

One third of grantees who responded to the survey question found no serious challenges in relation to volunteer engagement (6/18). However, among those who did, the most frequently cited issues related to staffing and volunteer management. These were often interlinked, as some staff responsible for volunteer coordination had left or were focused on other aspects of the project. Some projects noted that ensuring good commitment from volunteers had been challenging, where often they had considerable interest in volunteering opportunities but with a high drop-off rate in terms of those progressing to attending volunteering sessions. Due to delays in engaging volunteers for some projects, some volunteer tasks were consequently carried out over winter, which may have contributed to this.

Other challenges in engaging volunteers were more practical in nature, where a lack of access or transport to often rural activities may have restricted participation. One project also noted they were only able to offer volunteering during standard Monday-Friday 9am-5pm working hours, which may have limited the profile of volunteers able to contribute. Managing the need to both recruit new volunteers and provide engaging activities for existing volunteers required careful consideration, as one project highlighted:

‘Finding a suitable balance between engaging and recruiting new volunteers, whilst maintaining strong connections with regular volunteers and offering active and interesting events has also been challenging.’ **(Wave 1 survey response)**

Partnerships

Feedback from the Wave 1 survey suggests that 55 organisations are formally supporting project delivery, increasing from a total of 50 at the point of project application. Overall, 14 out of 20 projects have formal partnerships, although all projects are working in informal partnerships in some respect, whether this be with landowners and/or with local community groups. Working in a formal partnership was driven by several factors. Most commonly, partners had prior experience in the targeted habitat, had existing working relationships and/or shared similar goals and objectives.

Three projects highlighted the importance of longstanding relationships between partners, where trust and familiarity supported smooth delivery. Two projects also cited shared goals and the ability to tailor activities to landowners and farmers as contributing to effective partnership working. Factors such as sharing similar goals and ambitions were also cited less frequently (two projects).

Grantees were broadly positive when asked to describe the current level of partnership collaboration on their project. On a scale of 1-5 (where 5 is very good and 1 is very poor), the average rating for partnership collaboration was 4.1 out of 5, with all projects noting levels either 3 or above.

Two main factors cited for successful partnerships were good communication and complementary experience/expertise. Clear communication, including providing detail of roles and responsibilities and expectations of partners within project delivery enabled efficient collaboration. Collaborative planning structures, such as steering groups and joint delivery meetings, provided regular opportunities for reflection and learning. These mechanisms helped to build shared understanding across organisations and volunteers, also supporting coordination across regions.

Complementary expertise helped fill skill gaps in respective areas and benefited organisations through knowledge sharing. Many partnerships brought together organisations with strengths in habitat restoration, ecological surveying, volunteer coordination, and community engagement. In some cases, partners also delivered training sessions or workshops for local groups and schools, helping to raise awareness of nature recovery in the wider community.

‘Partners can share experience and expertise with each other, as well as working in a more joined up manner to support nature and promote nature engagement across the [local area]. This occurs at the steering group meetings, which partners have found particularly useful.’ **(Wave 1 survey response)**

To date, coordinating work across multiple partners has sometimes caused challenges, especially when managing the different systems, processes, and priorities of each partner involved. However, as noted by grantees, these challenges were relatively minor and overall the partnerships have been crucial to successful project delivery up to this point. Some projects noted that partners were able to provide support with administrative aspects of project delivery over time.

‘We invited coordinators from different partner organisations to join meetings and support with the more administrative elements of the project, such as monitoring and managing volunteer paperwork across the project. This helped to free up capacity and made it easier for them to engage in our delivery activities’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

Within the Wave 1 survey, there were also limited challenges identified in relation to partnership arrangements, with eight projects suggesting they had no or limited concerns moving forward. This confidence was driven by either long-term working arrangements or positive experiences relating to the successful establishment of the project and partnership arrangements.

‘The history of the partnership working on similar large scale projects and arrangements already in place would suggest that the partnership will continue to grow in strength.’ **(Wave 1 survey response)**

Managing capacity and resources across partners was raised by two projects, whilst wider challenges in project delivery were also raised as factors which may impact partnerships. Maintaining partnerships beyond the end of project delivery was raised by one project as a consideration for the final phase of delivery of activity and was anticipated to be a potential challenge in the future.

‘One potential challenge is maintaining consistent engagement with a diverse range of partners after the projects have been completed, especially if priorities or resources change over time. Some landowners may face unforeseen circumstances that impact their ability to participate, while community groups might have fluctuating capacity.’ **(Wave 1 survey response)**

Landowner Engagement

A key aspect of informal partnership working is engagement with landowners, including landowners in the public sector such as water companies, or private landowners such as farmers. Over half of projects have engaged with landowners to a large extent (11/20) whilst over a third have done so to some extent (7/20). Engaging landowners was enabled in many cases by pre-existing working relationships, which were therefore strengthened through SSF.

Seeking initial contact with landowners through local connections or farming networks was described by project staff as an effective approach when finding new sites. It was suggested that this approach also allowed projects to utilise their existing knowledge base, reducing time spent engaging with prospective landowners which can be time intensive. Examples of effective approaches included one project creating a 'landowner pack' to provide details of the terms of the grant and set clear expectations for the project. Building and retaining trust with landowners was also important for effective delivery of habitat activity and would ensure the legacy of the projects beyond the funding period.

'Having the money for a capital injection to deliver plans worked on for years is also doing a lot towards consolidating existing relationships, proving the [organisation] delivers what it promises and also helps engaging newer landowners...where nature may not be their primary driver.' **(Wave 1 survey response)**

Three projects noted that being able to demonstrate successful activity delivered so far was effective at engaging landowners; this was often seen through using networks of landowners and neighbouring sites to encourage others to become involved.

'Having an example site that we have been able to show them around, so that they can see what interventions we have carried out and the effect they are having, before deciding whether they want to do anything on their land.' **(Wave 1 survey response)**

Challenges associated with engaging landowners were predominantly related to administrative and bureaucratic issues, typically involving delays in securing third-party agreements and, in some cases, landowners found procurement processes and paperwork off-putting. Some landowners lacked the time to properly engage with the programme (four projects), which was linked to communication issues with landowners. In some cases, landowners held specific expectations or beliefs about the project and environmental interventions that discouraged their participation. Additionally, some landowners had conflicting commitments or limited capacity or availability to engage.

'Our demonstration days had to be planned during our capital works, which, due to breeding bird season and ground conditions meant that autumn was the only time to conduct these activities. Unfortunately, this is a particularly busy time for farmers and landowners, so attracting this demographic to our landowner engagement events was difficult.' **(Wave 1 survey response)**

It was suggested by one project that many landowners are receptive to advice on how to better manage their own sites for nature, however, ensuring that action is implemented presents a challenge because it requires ongoing monitoring. Others were hesitant to commit due to concerns over potential disruption to their land-use or the long-term maintenance, and associated cost, of the sites. Not all landowners were open to engaging with the programme, in some instances due to firmly held beliefs about land use, as well as the evolving policy landscape and changes to farm payments creating long-term uncertainty.

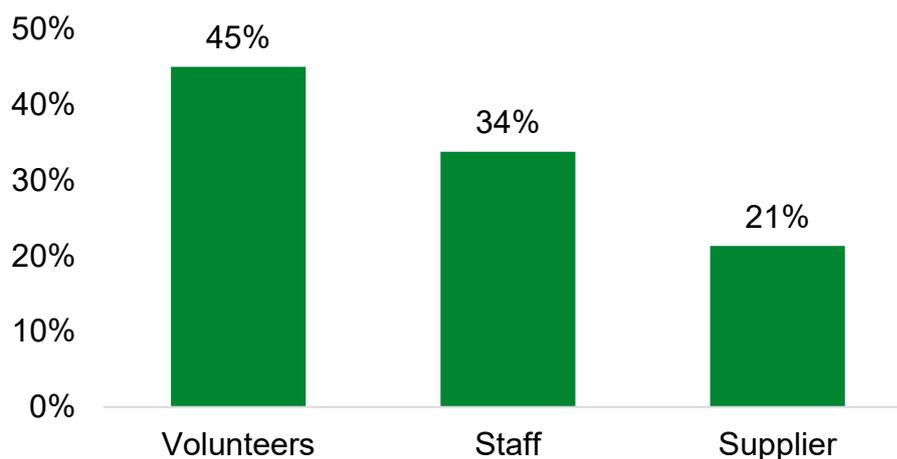
‘Competing grants and more lucrative offers. Institutional or cultural views producing resistance to new ideas or willingness to carry out ecological management or tree planting.’ **(Wave 1 survey response)**

‘There's a big divide between landowners that want to help make change, and those that are not at all interested, the latter being an issue when they're the main neighbouring landowner.’ **(Wave 1 survey response)**

Monitoring and Surveys

Nineteen out of 20 SSF projects conducted monitoring surveys, amounting to 1,059 individual completed surveys. Nearly three quarters (74%) of the surveys were conducted in wildlife-rich habitats. As demonstrated in Figure 2.16 below, project staff, external suppliers and volunteers all played a considerable role in completing habitat and species surveys. While volunteers carried out nearly half of all surveys (45%), suppliers were predominantly responsible for specialist surveys, such as UK Hab and Modular River Physical (MoRPh) assessments. Please note that additional detail on the timing of said surveys alongside habitat actions will be explored in further detail in the final evaluation report.

Figure 2.16: Proportion of monitoring surveys completed by volunteers, staff and suppliers



Base: Wave 1 Monitoring information (N=1,059).

Species surveys made up the majority (64%) of the surveys conducted. As shown in Table 2.2. below, the largest number of species surveys focused on birds (224 surveys), representing a third (33%) of all species surveys, with many targeting breeding birds. Pollinators (bees, moths, butterflies) were the second most surveyed species group, with 207 surveys (31% of species surveys). Among surveys focussed on mammals (86 surveys, 13% of species surveys) water voles received the most attention with more than half of all species surveys (44 surveys).

Table 2.2: Proportion of species surveys

Species focus	Number of surveys conducted	% of all surveys conducted (1,059)	% of species surveys (675)
Birds	224	21%	33%
Pollinators (bees, moths, butterflies)	207	20%	31%
Mammals	86	8%	13%
Other insects and invertebrates	49	5%	7%
Reptile	30	3%	4%
Invasive non-native species (INNS)	16	2%	2%
Plants & Fungi	13	1%	2%
Amphibians	7	1%	1%
Fish	2	0.2%	0.3%
No clear focus/baseline survey	41	4%	6%
Total	675	64%	100%

Base: Wave 1 Monitoring information. Please note that due to rounding, figures may appear to be slightly more or less than 100%.

Habitat surveys accounted for 36% of all surveys conducted. Table 2.3 over page provides a more detailed breakdown of habitat surveys. The largest category was habitat-specific surveys (141 surveys, 37% of habitat surveys), which focused on specific habitat types, such as saltmarshes, or features like dipwells. Additionally, several projects used established systems for habitat assessment, with UK Hab surveys (26% of habitat surveys) and MoRPh surveys (9% of habitat surveys).

Table 2.3: Proportion of habitat surveys

Survey focus	Number of surveys conducted	% of all surveys (N=1,059)	% of habitat surveys (N=382)
Habitat specific survey	141	13%	37%
UK Hab	99	9%	26%
Botanical survey	53	5%	14%
MoRPh	33	3%	9%
Soil	1	0.1%	0.3%
No clear focus/baseline survey	55	5%	14%
Total	382	36%	100%

Base: Wave 1 Monitoring information.

Projects also discussed their monitoring approaches within reflective workshops. There was a strong understanding that ecological change takes time, with projects highlighting that while early results such as species sightings or vegetation growth may appear within one or two years of intervention, more substantial and lasting changes often take three to six years, especially in more complex systems like rivers or mosaics of different habitats.

To support this, many projects have built in monitoring periods of up to five years post-delivery, often with support from SSF-funding. They note that this also represents progress from previous funding programmes, which offered less provision for long-term tracking. However, there were some concerns about sustaining monitoring beyond this timeframe.

‘We have allocated some funding for monitoring over the next five years. Most funding programmes do not have this so that is much better than what we have had in the past’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

Several projects, particularly those delivering rewilding or large scale habitat restoration, are developing longer-term monitoring plans extending ten to fifteen years.

‘The rewilding part of the project is developing a long-term monitoring strategy that looks well beyond the typical project lifespan. The intention is to build a 10-15 year monitoring strategy that will mean there is continuity of data and insights over the long term’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

2.2.4 Connecting People with Nature

Sub-Section Summary

- Grantees have organised a total of 358 events, with more than 11,493 participants (including 1,390 from events with schools and youth groups).
- Almost all SSF projects (17/19) are seeking to engage new audiences through their connecting people with nature activity.

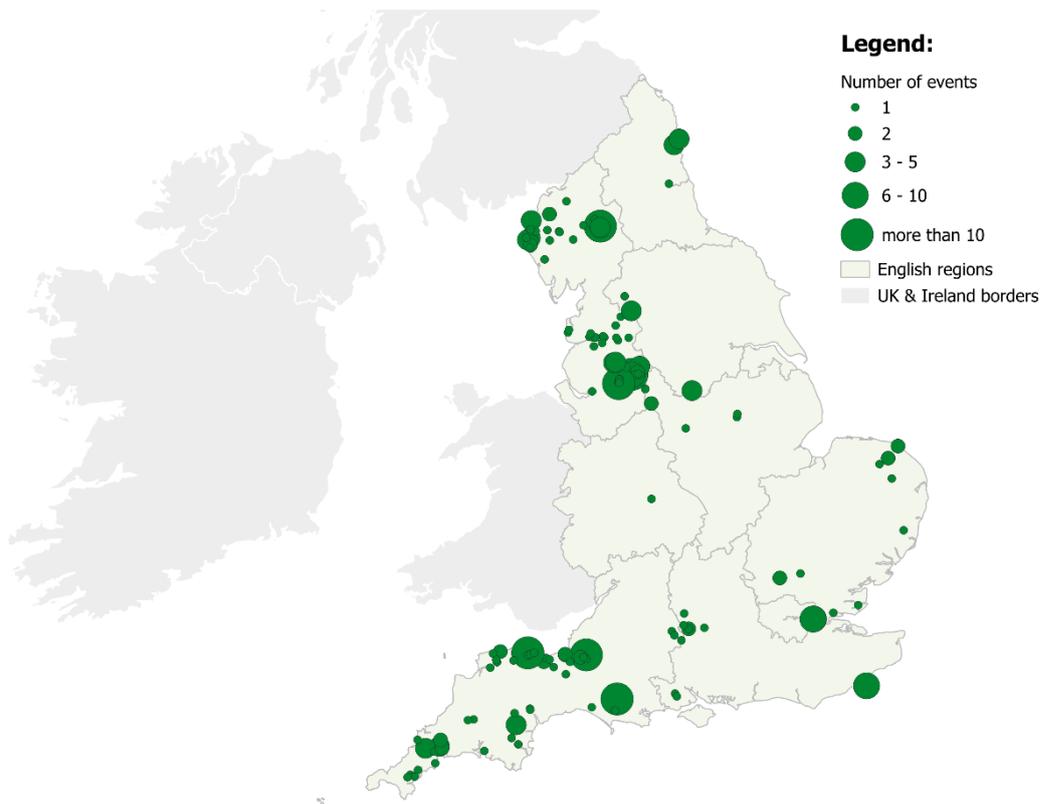
This sub-section provides an overview of key metrics informed by project Monitoring information explore project staff reflections on volunteer and public engagement activities within projects.

Reported Connecting People with Nature Activity

The majority of projects have made progress in delivering their planned connecting people with nature activities. In the Wave 1 survey, 12 out of 20 grantees reported delivering these activities to some extent, while seven reported delivering them to a large extent.

Up to January 2025, 19 projects have organised a total of 358 events, with more than 11,493 participants. Figure 2.17 below and Table 2.4 over page show that events were particularly concentrated in the North and South West, both in terms of number and attendance. This largely reflects the geographical spread of projects across SSF.

Figure 2.17: Number of events mapped



Base: Wave 1 Monitoring information (N=352). Please note that some events were not represented because they took place remotely.

Table 2.4: Events and attendance by region

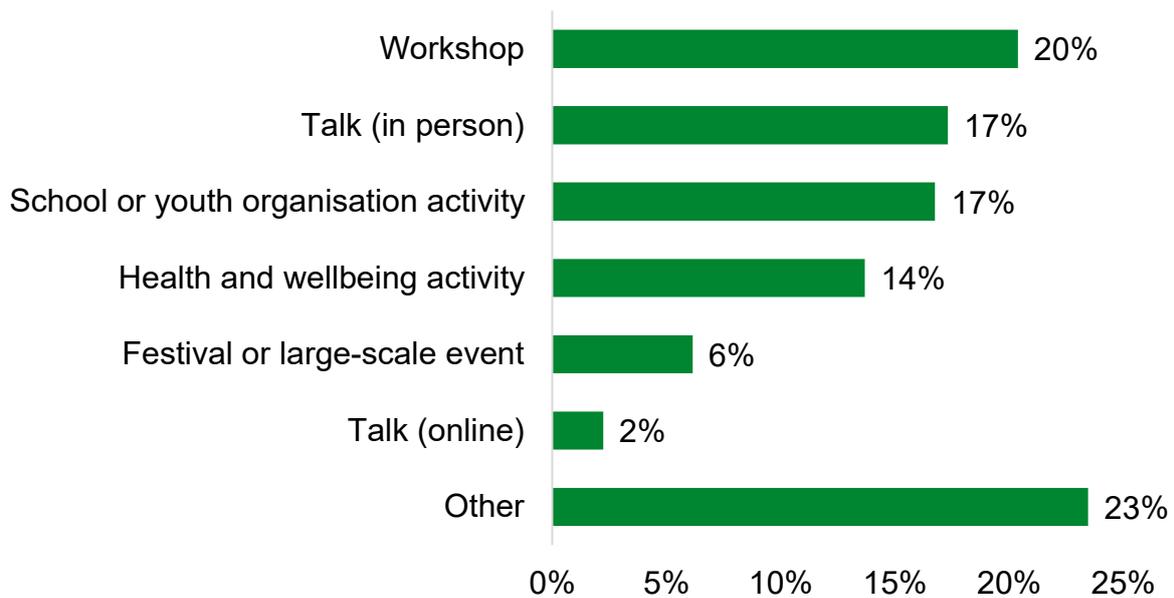
Region	Number of events	Number of people attending
North West	173	3,698
South West	110	3,541
South East	23	2,936
East of England	20	286
North East	10	572
Yorkshire and The Humber	8	71
East Midlands	7	122
West Midlands	1	12
London	0	0
Remote	6	255
Total	358	11,493

Base: Wave 1 Monitoring information (N=329). Please note that N is in relation to the number of records. One record can include more than one event.

Figures 2.18 and 2.19 over page reveal that projects have looked to engage people in various ways. Workshops have been the most common mode of engagement, making up 20% of all events. A substantial proportion of events did not align neatly with the predefined categories and were therefore classified by projects as 'other'. Of the 'other' forms of engagement, nearly one-third were oral history interviews that were later shared with public audiences, primarily by one organisation. Other engagement also included guided walks or site visits delivered across multiple projects. Whilst the large proportion of activity recorded under the 'Other' category highlights the diversity of engagement opportunities supported through SSF, the evaluation team will review how response categories can be refined to better capture the full range of activity in the final phase of the evaluation.

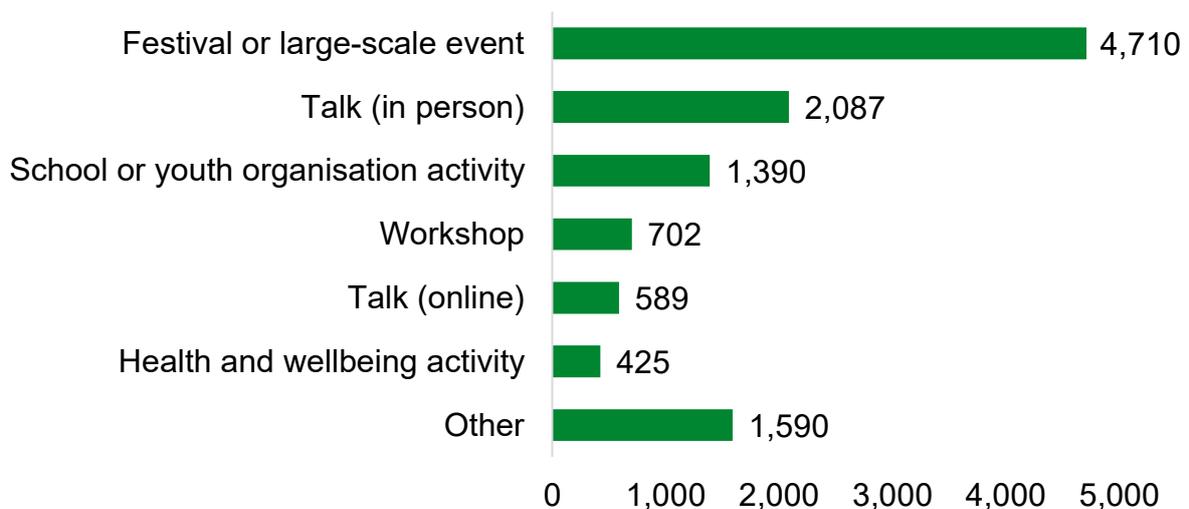
While workshops accounted for the highest proportion of events, the greatest audience reach (41%) came from projects' participation in festivals and large-scale events, such as the New Forest & Hampshire County Show and Nature Festival in Townley Park in Burnley. In contrast, health and wellbeing activities, despite comprising 14% of all events, represented the smallest share of total attendance. This suggests that these activities were typically delivered in smaller group settings. This is to be expected given that health and wellbeing activity based in nature are commonly targeted towards a particular community or group.

Figure 2.18: Proportion of events by event type



Base: Wave 1 Monitoring information (N=358).

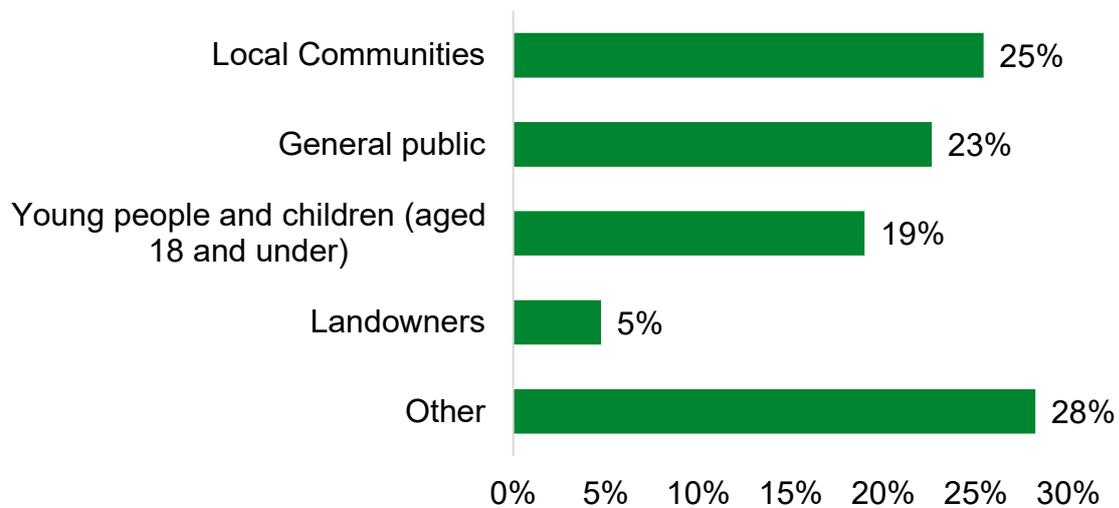
Figure 2.19: Event attendance by event type



Base: Wave 1 Monitoring information (N=11,493).

To date, project events have been largely focused on local communities (25%) and the general public (23%) and a small number of events focussed on landowners (Figure 2.20 over page). The general public made up the largest audience group, representing half (50%) of all attendees across SSF events. A considerable proportion of events have targeted particular demographic groups, captured by the 'Other' category. This includes young adults (age 18 - 30) and disabled adults.

Figure 2.20: Share of event records by target audience



Base: Wave 1 Monitoring information (N=358).

Project Staff Reflections on Connecting People with Nature Activity

As highlighted in Section 2.2.3 above, many project staff reported that volunteer engagement has been key to successfully connecting people with nature. Providing positive, hands-on volunteer experiences where individuals can see the physical impact of their contributions has proven effective across many projects. This approach helps people feel actively involved and more connected to the project site.

As part of the reflective workshops, one staff member highlighted how developing a sense of community ownership over the sites has already had a marked impact on people's behaviour, with an observed reduction in anti-social behaviour on the project site. Offering training opportunities and ensuring that volunteers enjoy their time, for example by providing refreshments, also contributed to more rewarding experiences.

'Our main issue has been anti-social behaviour at the site, but since people have been involved there have been good signs of [reduced anti-social behaviour]' (**Reflective workshop response**)

Many organisations also found that the strong connections formed with schools, community organisations and other partners were an asset in engaging people with nature. Working with partners allowed projects to access new audiences and co-develop activities that were attractive to different groups.

'Procuring community and educational partners has helped with capacity in this area, and they have good connections in the wider community to help bring new people in.' (**Wave 1 survey response**)

For some projects, incorporating community voice into the design of their activities has been another factor for success to date. For example, one project decided to name one of their sites where restoration actions were taking place after a local resident and invited local groups to partake in the activity.

Across projects, listening to community members' preferences for activities on local sites and considering how to embed community voice within said activity has helped to ensure that what is being offered is relevant to communities, builds genuine interest and empowers them to take ownership. This approach also helps to build capacity within community groups to deliver nature-based activities in the future. Working with organisations and individuals with experience in community engagement was noted by some as a factor for success.

'The community groups have been encouraged to plan the activities they would like to do with a nature focus, so they build their understanding and confidence about doing activities in nature.' **(Wave 1 survey response)**

'There is excitement and buzz around the [local area] and the fields - one of which will be named after a local resident' **(Reflective workshop response)**

Overall, grantees and project staff reported having faced limited challenges in delivering activities that connect people with nature to date within their project delivery. Most commonly, five grantees suggested that it can be difficult to establish effective relationships with local groups and organisations, given the short timescales of projects, particularly in new areas where relationships and trust had yet to be established.

'Making connections with groups when new to working in an area - this is taking time as you need to connect with the right person particularly in a school.' **(Wave 1 survey response)**

Engaging individuals outside of established community groups has been challenging for some projects, particularly in encouraging attendance at events. Reaching these audiences often requires additional effort to address socio economic barriers, such as the financial cost of transport and perceptions that these types of activities are not for 'people like them'. Other factors, including time constraints and a general lack of prior interest in conservation, also contribute to lower engagement. As a result, projects have been working on improving accessibility and diversifying their engagement methods.

'With the [project sites] spanning over such a large area, it has been challenging to make connections with people who are less engaged in environmental projects and volunteering. These far-reach groups require a gradual and developed approach to build confidence and relationships, which has been difficult to consistently deliver across the whole [project]' **(Wave 1 survey response)**

'Since submitting the original proposal for the project, experience gathered within the [Trust] has suggested that rather than engaging communities [facing barriers to nature] through volunteering, alternative methods may be more successful.' **(Wave 1 survey response)**

Similarly, some staff noted that community engagement requires dedicated time and resources, which not all project staff have. Where rangers and project officers had to balance technical project delivery, community engagement activities were sometimes prioritised less.

‘Rangers and project officers do not always have the time to coordinate engagement.’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

With sites often in hard-to reach locations getting groups of volunteers or schools to visit has proven challenging for some projects. One project sought to address this challenge by offering transport and engaging with local community transport companies that could volunteer their services. Others have used digital content to offer virtual engagement where physical access is restricted.

Some projects also reported challenges around the flexibility needed to deliver outdoor-based activities. While advance registration is important for planning, factors such as weather conditions or delays in material availability can prevent activities from running as intended. Additionally, attendance on the day is often unpredictable, despite pre-booking. These factors highlight the need to balance planning ahead and the ability to adapt, including having suitable backup activities in place.

Engaging New Audiences

Almost all SSF projects (89%, 17/19) reported efforts to engage new audiences through their connecting people with nature activity. The majority of projects (13) have sought to engage with new audiences by connecting with community and local groups (e.g. youth groups, local community organisations). Additionally, engagement officers have worked directly within local communities by attending events and collaborating with schools and colleges.

Several projects placed particular emphasis on reaching underrepresented groups, including young people, refugees, and individuals with health conditions, often through partnerships with organisations that already support them.

‘Through working with partners and organisations who work with specific audiences, such as [national charity] and [local refugee action group]. Our work with [a national charity], engagement work at [local nature hub] all seek to target new audiences and create valuable connections with nature.’ **(Wave 1 survey response)**

Three projects took specific steps to remove common barriers to participation, such as transport, cost, access to toilets, and complex registration. For example, one project built new toilet facilities to improve accessibility, while another introduced a simple digital platform to streamline signups.

Many organisations aimed to attract a broad audience by offering a wide range of events and opportunities. Seven projects identified volunteering as an effective way to engage new participants and build interest in their work. Others used more targeted methods, such as presenting at agricultural shows to connect with the farming community, hosting events in youth oriented venues like social cinemas, or using digital media including podcasts, short films, and social platforms to reach younger people. Five projects highlighted social media campaigns as a central part of their engagement strategy.

Projects also delivered a variety of inclusive activities to reach children, families, and people from disadvantaged backgrounds. These included family nature days, forest school sessions, and tailored school visits, with some focusing specifically on children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). In one case, a community engagement lead created curriculum linked content for local farm schools and SEN students, introducing them to topics such as river restoration and wildlife monitoring.

‘We have brought in young people, SEN children, and volunteers to help with monitoring and community engagement.’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

‘We have recognised that if we can effectively engage young people, this can establish a long lasting investment in nature.’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

‘We have a big focus on social equity and diversifying our audiences, bringing in people who might not usually be engaged in nature and conservation. This also helps to build some longevity to be continued after the funded period.’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

Project staff highlighted the importance of dedicated engagement roles. Where projects had funding for community facing staff, this helped build trust and increase involvement from people who may not have previously engaged with nature.

3 Impact Evaluation

SSF project delivery commenced in April 2024 and is scheduled to be completed by February 2026. This section explores the SSF's impact up to April 2025, drawing on evidence from project spatial data and insights from workshops involving staff from across the 20 projects. It includes reporting against project contribution to the statutory habitat target and project staff's views on emerging impacts identifiable at this interim stage of the SSF.

Section Summary

- In total, 205.2 hectares of habitat have benefited from SSF action across England. Nearly two-thirds of SSF-funded action so far was habitat restoration (62%; 127.4 hectares), as well as 33.8 hectares of habitat creation (16%) and 43.9 hectares of habitat management (21%).
- The majority of actions have taken place outside protected sites, with 17% of spatial data submitted located within protected sites (34.4 hectares).
- The South West has seen the most action on habitats, with 125.4 hectares (61%) total, followed by the North West with 34.5 hectares (17%).
- A range of habitats have benefited from SSF-funded creation, restoration, and management actions, including 131.2 hectares woodland and forest, 34.7 hectares of grassland, 25.3 hectares rivers, 7.7 hectares wetland and 6.3 hectares heathland and scrub.
- To date, eight projects have completed action that will contribute to the statutory wildlife-rich habitat target, having created or restored 104.3 hectares of wildlife-rich habitats outside of protected sites. Of this action, 8.7 hectares (8%) was habitat creation, and 95.6 ha (92%) was habitat restoration.
- Almost two-thirds of action to create/restore the 104.3 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat was in the South West (64%; 67.2 hectares), with just over a quarter evenly split between the North West (13%; 13.4 hectares) and South East (13%; 14.1 hectares) regions.
- The restoration of wildlife-rich woodland was a key driver of SSF-funded action that contributed to the statutory habitat target, accounting for 53% of all action to create or restore wildlife-rich habitat (52.7/104.3 hectares).

The section explores impact across all action to create, restore, or manage habitats, as well as action to create or restore wildlife-rich habitat outside of protected sites that contributes to the statutory habitat target.

3.1 Overview

It should be noted that only nine out of 20 projects have submitted spatial data relating to sites where all SSF-funded habitat action has been completed. This means that, at this interim stage, the reporting of contributions to the statutory habitat target is an underestimation of the total progress made by projects towards action to create or restore wildlife-rich habitat. It is expected that further action to create/restore wildlife-rich habitats will take place in the second year of delivery and be reported once complete.

Reporting against the statutory habitat target is a key aspect of the impact evaluation. This will contribute to the target set out in the Environmental Targets (Biodiversity) Regulations (2023): 'In excess of 500,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitats will be restored or created by 31st December 2042, since 31st January 2023'. The target is action-based rather than outcome-based (quality) and relies on the assumption that habitats of sufficient quality will be restored if the correct actions are undertaken. Only action taken to create or restore wildlife-rich habitats will contribute to the target. Natural England's definitions of habitat creation, restoration and management can be found in [Annex B](#).

Following submission of the spatial data by projects, there were a range of steps to validate, clean and triangulate the data to ensure it meets the requirements of the statutory habitat target. The detail of this process is set out in [Annex A](#). Since the target is action-based, a key aspect of the analysis process is the **confidence assessment**, which seeks:

- To confirm which actions have been delivered in practice at the end of project delivery. This is in response to potential challenges that may have arisen and in recognition of the ongoing maintenance or additional work required to create or restore wildlife-rich habitat.
- To build layers of confidence that action will result in wildlife-rich habitat of sufficient quality.
- To evidence this confidence, and to ensure that any data feeding into statutory targets is robust.

The programme and evaluation teams recognise that projects have the skills and expertise to determine what actions are appropriate to restore or create wildlife-rich habitat. In being awarded funding there is an implicit trust that they have the capacity to deliver this activity and manage associated risks, founded on a robust and rigorous application process. Therefore, the role of the evaluators is to consider the overall confidence that the action taken will lead to wildlife-rich habitat of sufficient quality. This process will consider a range of evidence, including future plans and likely timeframe, to ensure that longer-term actions are appropriately valued.

Please note that throughout this report, habitats have been classified and grouped using Level 2 and Level 3 UK Hab categories. Full details on the UK Hab classification hierarchy can be found on their [website](#).

3.1.1 Action to Create, Restore or Manage Habitats

As illustrated in Table 3.1 and Figure 3.1 below, spatial analysis indicates that, so far, nine SSF projects have completed actions on 205.2 hectares of habitat across England. This is 2.8% of the anticipated 7,316 hectares total funded area. This comprises of habitat creation action (33.8 hectares; 17%), habitat restoration (127.4 hectares; 62%), and habitat management (43.9 hectares; 21%). At application stage, across all 20 SSF projects it was reported that by the end of project delivery they would likely bring benefits for nature across 248 sites covering an area of 7,316 ha. As highlighted above, it is important to recognise that this report only provides detail on spatial data relating to sites where all SSF-funded habitat action has been completed. This means that, at this interim stage, the reporting of delivery progress is likely an underestimation.

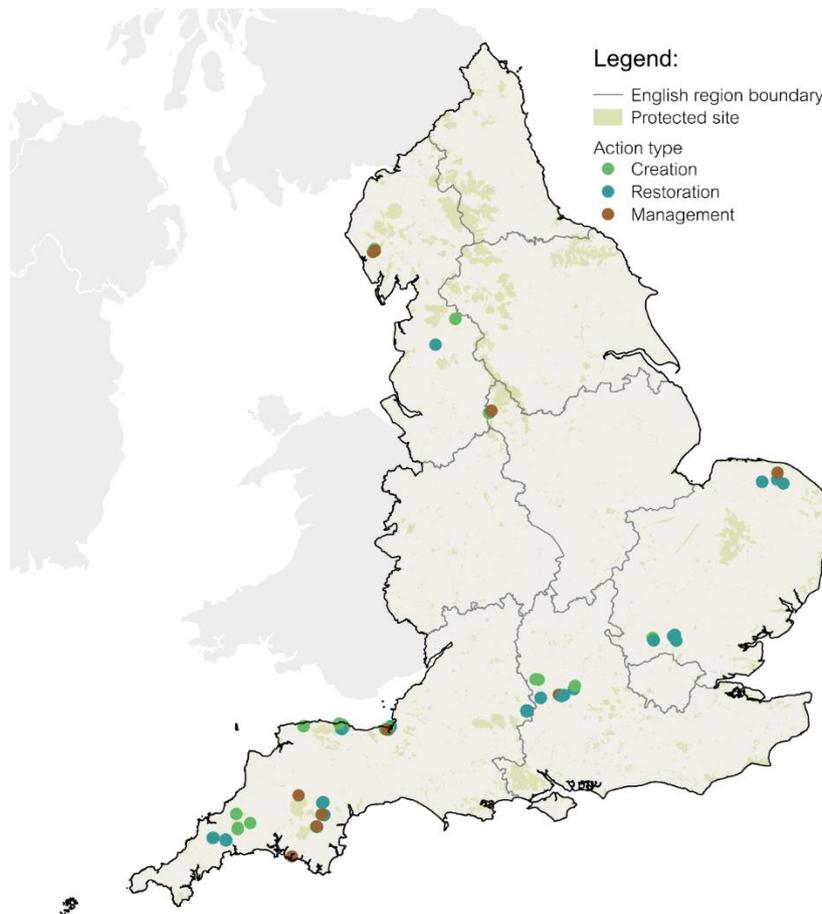
Table 3.1 and Figure 3.1 below set out where habitat action has taken place. The South West has seen the most action on habitats, with 125.4 hectares (61%) total, followed by the North West with 34.5ha (17%).

Table 3.1 Area of all SSF-funded actions on habitats, by region and action type

Region	Creation activities (ha)	Restoration activities (ha)	Management activities (ha)	Total area (ha)	% area
South West	17.5	83.8	24.1	125.4	61%
North West	13.0	11.2	10.3	34.5	17%
South East	2.7	23.2	6.0	31.9	16%
East of England	0.3	8.3	3.2	11.8	6%
East Midlands	0.3	0.9	0.3	1.6	1%
Total	33.8	127.4	43.9	205.2	100%

Base: Spatial Data (N=9 projects). Please note: Due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

Figure 3.1: Mapped area of all completed SSF-funded actions



Base: Spatial Data (N=9 projects).

Activities have most commonly taken place in woodland habitats (131.2 hectares), with large areas of restoration (74.1 hectares) and management (42.5 hectares) (Table 3.2). Grassland areas totalled 34.7 hectares, largely due to restoration efforts (22.7 hectares). Other notable areas of work included on rivers and lakes (25.3 hectares), wetland (7.7 hectares), and heathland and scrub (6.3 hectares), with varying degrees of creation and management, but limited or no restoration activities in those categories.

Table 3.2 Area of all SSF-funded actions on habitats, by broad habitat and action type

Broad Habitat	Creation activities (ha)	Restoration activities (ha)	Management activities (ha)	Total area (ha)	% area
Woodland and forest	14.6	74.1	42.5	131.2	64%
Grassland	10.6	22.7	1.4	34.7	17%
Rivers and lakes	5.4	19.9	-	25.3	12%
Wetland and coastal	2.2	5.4	-	7.7	4%
Heathland and scrub	1.0	5.3	-	6.3	3%
Total	33.8	38.0	133.4	205.2	100%

Base: Spatial Data (N=9 projects). Please note that due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

The majority of actions have taken place outside of protected sites, with 17% of spatial data submitted located within protected sites (34.4/205.2 hectares). Within protected sites, 34.4 hectares of habitat were included in conservation activities, consisting of 2.8 hectares of creation, 31.6 hectares of restoration, but no management activities (Table 3.3). The largest area of work completed were in woodland habitats, accounting for 22.7 hectares, with most of the activities focusing on restoration (21.3 hectares) and creation (1.3 hectares). Wetland activities (5.8 hectares) were split between creation (1.5 hectares) and restoration (4.3 hectares) works. Heathland and scrub (5.3 hectares), and rivers and lakes (0.6 hectares) activities were limited to restoration work only.

Table 3.3 Area of all SSF-funded actions on habitats taking place in protected sites, by broad habitat and action type

Broad Habitat	Creation activities (ha)	Restoration activities (ha)	Management activities (ha)	Total area (ha)	% area
Woodland and forest	1.3	21.3	-	22.7	66%
Wetland	1.5	4.3	-	5.8	17%
Heathland and scrub	-	5.3	-	5.3	15%
Rivers and lakes	-	0.6	-	0.6	2%
Total	2.8	31.6	0.0	34.4	100%

Base: Spatial Data (N= 5 projects). Please note that due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

3.1.2 Action to Create or Restore Wildlife-rich Habitats

To date, eight of the nine projects have completed actions that will contribute to the statutory target for wildlife-rich habitat, with a total of 104.3 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat created or restored across five regions (Table 3.4). Restoration works constitute the majority of this total, accounting for 95.6 hectares (92%), while habitat creation activities cover 8.7 hectares (8%).

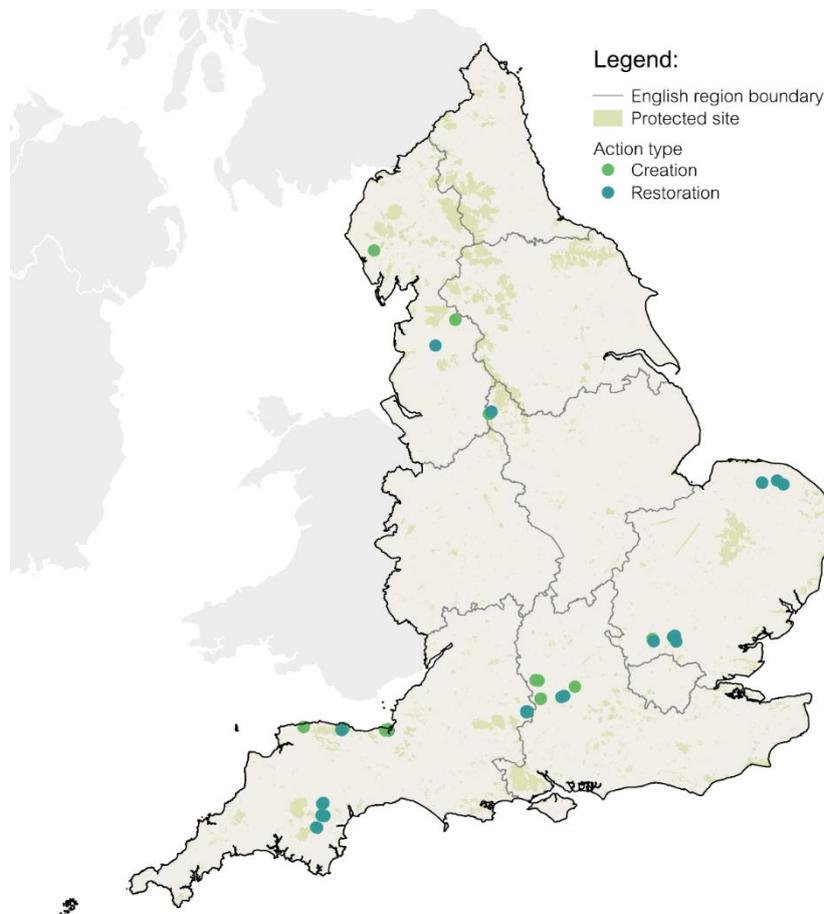
The South West region reported the largest overall area of habitat intervention (64%), with 64.0 hectares in restoration and 3.1 hectares of creation activities. The South East of England region followed, with a total of 14.1 hectares (13%), consisting predominantly of restoration efforts (11.4 hectares) and a smaller portion (2.7 hectares) allocated to habitat creation. A similar spread and area of activities took place in the North West (13.4 hectares), with 11.2 hectares of restoration work and 2.3 hectares in creation. In the Eastern region, 0.3 hectares were created and 8.1 hectares restored, amounting to a total of 8.4 hectares. The East Midlands reported the smallest area, with 0.3 hectares created and 0.9 hectares restored, totalling 1.2 hectares.

Table 3.4: Area of wildlife-rich habitats likely created and restored, by region and action type

Region	Creation activities (ha)	Restoration activities (ha)	Total area (ha)	% area
North West	2.3	11.2	13.4	13%
East of England	0.3	8.1	8.4	8%
South West	3.1	64.0	67.2	64%
East Midlands	0.3	0.9	1.21%	1%
South East	2.7	11.4	14.1	13%
Total	8.7	95.6	104.3	100%

Base: Spatial Data (N=8 projects). Please note that due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

Figure 3.2: Mapped area of wildlife-rich habitats likely created and restored, by region and action type



Base: Spatial Data (N=8 projects).

The largest habitat targeted for action was woodland habitats, with a combined total of 55.2 hectares (2.5 hectares created and 52.7 hectares restored) (Table 3.5). River and lake habitat actions totalled 24.5 hectares (5.4 hectares created and 19.1 hectares restored). Grassland activities were focused solely on restoration work, totalling 22.7 hectares. Small-scale work was undertaken in wetlands (1.9 hectares).

Only 22.4 hectares of actions undertaken which would otherwise count towards the target were excluded due to low confidence in the outcomes. It is important to note that the reasons for these exclusions were due to limited detail or missing data, rather than inappropriate actions. The actions will be re-evaluated when more information becomes available.

Table 3.5: Area of wildlife-rich habitats likely created and restored, by broad habitat and action type

Broad Habitat	Creation activities (ha)	Restoration activities (ha)	Total area (ha)	% area
Rivers and lakes	5.4	19.1	24.5	24%
Grassland	-	22.7	22.7	22%
Woodland and forest	2.5	52.7	55.2	53%
Wetland	0.8	1.1	1.9	2%
Total	8.7	95.6	104.3	100%

Base: Spatial Data (N=8 projects). Please note that due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

3.1.3 Ecological review

The reviewed actions cover a variety of habitat types and are aligned with habitat restoration objectives, reflecting a range of ecological processes. High-confidence outcomes (as detailed in Annex A Methods Step 5: Confidence Assessment) are mostly associated with hydrological activities such as river restoration, and pond creation. There is also high confidence associated with targeted woodland management actions, such as invasive species control. These actions are well-evidenced and expected to produce improvements in habitat condition and biodiversity potential. In some cases, confidence in long-term success is not as high, though this is largely due to the need for sustained management and funding to build on the activities delivered through projects. For example, while some scrub removal and fencing interventions are promising, their success will depend on the implementation of ongoing management regimes and maintenance or restriction of grazing at an appropriate level.

Overall, the actions are expected to support the development of more resilient and diverse habitats in the future. This reflects a strong alignment between project design and ecological restoration principles, with appropriate expectations set for the timescales and management efforts required to achieve meaningful outcomes for species and ecosystems.

3.1.4 Perceived Environmental Impact of Projects To Date

Across the portfolio, grantees and project staff identified early and emerging impacts from project activity delivered at this interim stage. Within workshops, many project staff suggested that some habitat actions have already led to rapid wildlife responses. For example, increased swan and geese nesting and frogspawn following pond creation.

Staff also pointed to visible changes in habitats, including the removal of invasive species like Himalayan balsam and fences that previously confined hedgerows. Details of identified emerging impacts are explored by habitat type, under each of the sub-headings below.

Whilst grantees and project staff identified a range of short-term and emerging impacts, they also consistently acknowledged that many outcomes, particularly those related to species recovery, are longer-term goals. In these cases, staff described SSF-funded activity as part of a broader, long-term journey. This includes creating, restoring, and managing habitats, whilst also building the skills, motivation, and capacity within their organisations and local communities to continue managing and monitoring these habitats beyond the SSF funding period. It is anticipated that this collective effort will, over time, contribute to increased species abundance:

‘This [activity] takes time, this is not visible in the lifetime of the project. The idea is to allow the habitat to flourish (in theory) and erase invasive species. In the short term, the interventions are visible, but the impact will take time to show.’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

Staff commonly indicated that impact would depend on the initial results of habitat actions delivered during the SSF period and how effectively that action was implemented. Where early outcomes were positive, staff generally anticipated that impacts would become measurable within the timeframe of their monitoring plans, typically spanning 5 to 10 years, with scheduled reviews often at the 5-year mark to assess progress and respond to changing conditions. A smaller number of plans span longer time periods (e.g., 30 years), particularly where broader estate level management plans are in place. To support a clearer understanding of project impact within the scope of this evaluation, the evaluation team will explore mechanisms to identify a measurable timeframe during the final phase of the evaluation.

3.2 Rivers and Lakes

3.2.1 Action to Create, Restore or Manage Rivers and Lakes

So far, five projects have completed actions to create, restore or manage rivers and lakes. Across these projects, 25.3 hectares of freshwater habitats were the focus of ecological improvement, comprising 5.4 hectares of habitat creation and 19.9 hectares of restoration (Table 3.6). The majority of the work was carried out on rivers and streams (18.4 hectares), primarily through restoration efforts (18.2 hectares). Standing open water and canals accounted for 6.9 hectares, including 5.2 hectares of creation and 1.8 hectares of restoration. No management activities were reported in this dataset.

Table 3.6 Area of all SSF-funded actions on rivers and lakes habitats

Broad Habitat	Creation activities (ha)	Restoration activities (ha)	Management activities (ha)	Total area (ha)	% area
Rivers and streams	0.2	18.2	-	18.4	73%
Standing open water and canals	5.2	1.8	-	6.9	27%
Total	5.4	19.9	-	25.3	100%

Base: Spatial Data (N=5 projects). Please note that due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

3.2.2 Action to Create or Restore Wildlife-rich Rivers and Lakes

All of the creation activities and most of the restoration activities on freshwater habitats is likely to result in wildlife-rich areas. A total of 24.5 hectares of freshwater habitats were part of conservation activities that are likely to result in wildlife-rich areas, delivered by five projects (Table 3.7). The majority of this work has involved restoration (19.1 hectares), with a smaller proportion allocated to creation (5.4 hectares). Most of the restoration efforts focused on rivers and streams (17.7 hectares or 72%), while standing open water and canals (6.5 hectares or 27%) focused more on creation (5.2 hectares) than restoration (1.4 hectares) activities.

Table 3.7: Area of wildlife-rich habitats likely created and restored in rivers and lakes habitats

Broad Habitat	Area of creation activities (ha)	Area of restoration activities (ha)	Total area (ha)	% area
Rivers and streams	0.2	17.7	18.0	73%
Standing open water and canals	5.2	1.4	6.5	27%
Total	5.4	19.1	24.5	100%

Base: Spatial Data (N=5 projects). Please note that due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

3.2.3 Ecological Review

Four projects completed action to restore or create wildlife-rich freshwater habitats, particularly rivers and streams. For river habitats, three of these projects worked across five sites, implementing actions such as riverbank regrading, riparian planting, woody habitat creation, and improvements for fish migration through weir removal and barrage notching. One project's actions aimed at creating a new chalk stream. There is high confidence amongst project teams that these actions will lead to the restoration of wildlife-rich habitat, noting the suitability of actions taken and the strong likelihood of achieving ecological benefits.

Other rivers and streams were also targeted by two projects. The first project's actions aimed at restoring previously filled-in meanders, reconnecting backwater habitats, and opening the canopy, while the second project's actions aimed at creating juvenile fish refuges by lowering stream banks. Both projects reported high confidence in their actions, which this review supports, given the known effectiveness of these techniques in restoring hydrological function and enhancing river resilience.

For ponds, restoration activities by one project included doubling the size of three existing ponds. There is high confidence that this action will lead to wildlife-rich habitat of a high quality, noting benefits such as improved biodiversity, better water quality, and increased habitat resilience. In addition, three separate projects created new ponds, all expressing high confidence in the outcome. This review supports this view, recognising new ponds as valuable additions of priority habitat that enhance site-level habitat

One project created seasonal pools and seeded them with wet grass mix and native plug plants. This review supports the high confidence assigned to these actions, which target temporary ponds and scrapes, emphasising their value in creating habitat for wetland species and improving water retention to reduce flood risk.

Eutrophic standing waters were targeted by a project where actions included dredging, deepening, grading, vegetation clearance, and bunding, while creation actions involved adding gripes, muddy margins, and a new pond. These actions are confidently rated and supported by this review, as they improve habitat conditions for wetland birds, offering foraging and breeding opportunities.

In a restoration effort targeting ditches, one project's actions included re-digging a dry, succeeding ditch (a secondary drainage ditch) along a river, shaping the banks to promote marginal vegetation. While the project assigned high confidence to the action, this review recommends a medium rating, noting that long-term success hinges on ongoing management to prevent drying and succession from undermining the habitat's function.

For other standing water habitats, one project created ponds and scrapes to increase habitat diversity, while another project's actions aimed at restoring areas by removing silt and problematic species such as willow and typha. Additional restoration actions included deepening and grading out sites and clearing vegetation.

These actions are consistently rated with high confidence, and this review agrees they are effective in improving habitat structure and ecological function.

3.2.4 Perceived Project Impact on River and Lake Habitats

Project staff reported in workshops that a range of rivers and lakes interventions have led to early visible wildlife responses. Initial signs of ecological recovery were most commonly associated with pond creation and weir removal, where staff observed a range of wildlife beginning to use the sites:

‘The most immediate and obvious impact has been habitat creation. For example, after creating the first pond, we started seeing dragonflies within the same summer- wildlife establishes itself quite quickly. Another pond is now regularly used by swans and geese.’
(Reflective workshop response)

Staff reported that observing early wildlife responses was encouraging and suggested that interventions were working well. However, staff also acknowledged that measuring the full impact of activity on river and lake habitats will require more time. In particular, outcomes such as improvements in water quality and flow were noted to take longer to detect and are heavily influenced by seasonal and weather-related factors.

Staff from three projects highlighted that the removal of physical barriers is expected to enhance species movement and improve ecological connectivity along river corridors, although this impact is not yet observable at this stage of delivery. Similarly, staff from two projects noted that natural flood management techniques are anticipated to contribute to broader landscape-scale resilience and climate adaptation over time.

Based on these interventions, staff expected that created and restored habitats will begin to support the return of key species, including white-clawed crayfish, great crested newts, and various fish and bird species:

‘The removal of the weir is expected to have a significant impact on local wildlife. It will improve habitat connectivity for fish and crayfish, opening up access to upstream spawning grounds and allowing a wider range of species to thrive and reproduce.’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

All project staff indicated that they expect to measure these impacts over the longer term, using a range of approaches. For example, two projects reported that they have ringfenced funding to support ongoing habitat and species monitoring over the next five years. Others described investing in volunteer training, particularly Citizen Science methods, to support continued data collection. Further detail on long-term impact measurement is provided in Section 3.5.

3.3 Grassland, Heathland and Woodland

3.3.1 Action to Create, Restore or Manage Habitats

A total of 172.2 hectares of land were subject to habitat interventions in grassland, heathland and scrub, and woodland and forest habitats, delivered by nine projects. Within this, seven projects completed actions on grassland, three projects completed actions on heathland and scrub and six in woodland and forest.

This action comprised of 26.2 hectares of habitat creation, 102.1 hectares of habitat restoration, and 43.9 hectares of habitat management activities (Table 3.8). The largest area of work was in broadleaved mixed and yew woodland, which accounted for 131.2 hectares (76%), including considerable restoration (74.1 hectares) and management (42.5 hectares). Other notable contributions included neutral grassland (19.9 hectares; 12%) primarily through creation (10.6 hectares) and restoration (9.3 hectares), and calcareous grassland (12.7 hectares) which involved only restoration. Smaller areas of work were recorded in dwarf shrub heath (6.3 hectares), acid grassland (0.7 hectares), and modified grassland (1.3 hectares), each with a mix of activities. For acid grassland, the management area of 0.0 hectares is a rounded figure from 0.039 hectares of completed work.

Table 3.8 Area of all SSF-funded actions on habitats in grassland, heathland and scrub, and woodland and forest habitats

Broad Habitat	Creation activities (ha)	Restoration activities (ha)	Management activities (ha)	Total area (ha)	% area
Broadleaved mixed and yew woodland	14.6	74.1	42.5	131.2	76%
Neutral grassland	10.6	9.3	-	19.9	12%
Calcareous grassland	-	12.7	-	12.7	7%
Dwarf shrub heath	1.0	5.3	-	6.3	4%
Modified grassland	-	-	1.3	1.3	1%
Acid grassland	-	0.7	0.0	0.7	0%
Total	26.2	102.1	43.9	172.2	100%

Base: Spatial Data (N=7 projects). Please note that due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures. Additionally, within acid grassland, the management area of 0.0 hectares is a rounded figure from 0.039 hectares of completed work.

3.3.2 Action to Create or Restore Wildlife-rich Grassland, Heathland and Woodland

Five projects completed action to create or restore wildlife-rich grassland, heathland and scrub or woodland and forest. Amongst these projects, a total of 77.9 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat have been created and restored so far (Table 3.9).

Restoration accounted for 75.4 hectares, primarily targeting woodlands (55.2 hectares) and calcareous grassland (12.7 hectares). Creation activities totalled 2.5 hectares, with work focused solely on broadleaved mixed and yew woodland (2.5 hectares). Activities were limited to restoration work across all the grassland types; 0.7 hectares for acid grassland, 12.7 hectares from calcareous grassland, and 9.3 hectares for neutral grasslands.

Table 3.9: Area of wildlife-rich habitats likely created and restored in grassland, heathland, and woodland habitats

Broad Habitat	Area of creation activities (ha)	Area of restoration activities (ha)	Total area (ha)	% area
Acid grassland	-	0.7	0.7	1%
Broadleaved mixed and yew woodland	2.5	52.7	55.2	71%
Calcareous grassland	-	12.7	12.7	16%
Neutral grassland	-	9.3	9.3	12%
Total	2.5	75.4	77.9	100%

Base: Spatial Data (N=5 projects). Please note that due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

3.3.3 Ecological Review

Several projects targeted grassland habitats with varying restoration and management approaches. For acid grassland, two projects implemented seeding with appropriate mixes and bramble scrub control. While seeding actions were considered to have a medium confidence of success, bramble management was rated lower due to the requirement for ongoing effort to suppress regrowth.

A calcareous grassland restoration project involved seeding and plug planting of species such as devil's bit scabious and kidney vetch. Confidence in success was judged to be medium, which this review supported, recognising the dependence on local site conditions, species selection, and long-term management. For lowland meadows, one project employed hydrological restoration by lowering riverbanks to rewet floodplain meadows. This was given a high confidence rating, which this review agreed with, as such nature-based solutions are effective in restoring moisture-dependent plant communities.

Neutral grassland creation was attempted by one project with moderate confidence in success. For other neutral grassland, one project undertook bramble and Himalayan balsam clearance followed by seeding. Where balsam was described by staff as being effectively managed, the project's confidence in success was medium; however, in areas where it was not, this confidence rating was low. This review concurred, recognising the difficulty in managing invasive species and the need for catchment-scale action to ensure long-term effectiveness.

In modified grassland, actions of one project included installing a predator exclusion fence to protect breeding and wintering waders. This management action was given a high confidence level, which this review supported, citing its likely effectiveness in enhancing bird productivity. In heathland habitats, actions of one project included clearing scrub from lowland heath at two sites. Although the project expressed high confidence, this review considered medium confidence more appropriate, acknowledging the need for continuous follow-up to prevent regrowth. Upland heathland creation was also attempted by one project though detailed assessment of those efforts was limited in the data provided.

Broadleaf woodland actions included restoration and management across six sites. Conifer removal was carried out with high confidence in success, and this review agreed it was appropriate, given the immediate benefits to light levels and native vegetation recovery. Other shading species were also controlled, with such actions considered either restoration or management depending on context. Lowland beech and yew woodland management included holly removal, which the review agreed was effective in improving light conditions and promoting ground flora regeneration.

Wet woodland was targeted by three projects, mainly through hydrological interventions such as leaky dams and reconnecting rivers with floodplains. Where baseline wet woodland existed, these were restoration actions; elsewhere, they were classified as creation. The confidence in success was high and supported by this review.

A smaller-scale creation project involving tree planting received a medium confidence rating due to limitations in site hydrology and scale, which this review agreed with.

Finally, lowland mixed deciduous woodland was the focus of several actions. One project undertook habitat creation by planting native deciduous trees on grass moorland and upland heath. Control of regeneration of non-native species (Sitka and Larch) on these habitats was also employed, with medium to high confidence in success, which this review supported based on the expected improvements in habitat quality. Another project carried out selective felling and glade creation for restoration, with the review agreeing that these actions were highly likely to succeed.

3.3.4 Perceived Project Impact on Grassland, Heathland and Woodland Habitats

In projects working on grassland, heathland and woodland habitats, staff also frequently reported in workshops that emerging impacts can be seen through the visible changes in habitats. This includes tree felling, planting, implementing new grazing strategies, removing fences that confined hedgerows and installing fencing to protect habitats. These activities have commonly resulted in noticeable changes to vegetation and increased sightings of birds and pollinators e.g., bees and butterflies:

‘Even small changes have made a big visual difference. For example, removing the fences around the hedgerows has completely altered how the landscape looks. Those fences used to confine the hedgerows and create straight unnatural lines. Now that the fences are gone, the hedgerows have started to spread and grow more freely, and you can already see that change happening on site.’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

‘We’ve already started to see changes — particularly with skylarks, which are now establishing territories in the reversion fields. The impact has been noticeable right away, both in terms of wildlife and visually. The fields now look very different: instead of uniform rows of crops, we’ve got grass sown last year, which gives a much more natural appearance.’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

Project staff reported feeling encouraged by the early, identifiable results of their activities. However, they also acknowledged that the full extent of the impact achieved will become clearer over time, as staff and volunteers continue to monitor changes in species populations, for example, willow tits and lichen. In addition, staff recognised that the full ecological benefits of certain interventions, such as tree planting, may not be realised for another 20 to 30 years.

It is important to note that when project staff discussed the impact of their grassland, heathland, and woodland activities, they frequently linked these interventions to improved connections between local people and the natural environment. In many cases, staff suggested that visible changes to the sites had reduced barriers to access and encouraged local communities to engage more positively with the spaces. The impact of this activity on local people’s and volunteers’ connection to nature is explored in more detail in Section 3.5.

3.4 Wetland and Coastal Habitats

3.4.1 Action to Create, Restore or Manage Habitats

A total of 7.7 hectares of wetland habitats were completed by four projects that were entirely on fen, marsh and swamp habitats (Table 3.10). This included 2.2 hectares of habitat creation and 5.4 hectares of restoration. No management activities were recorded for this habitat type.

Table 3.10 Area of all SSF-funded actions on habitats in wetland habitats

Broad Habitat	Creation activities (ha)	Restoration activities (ha)	Management activities (ha)	Total area (ha)
Fen marsh and swamp	2.2	5.4	-	7.7
Total	2.2	5.4	-	7.7

Base: Spatial Data (N=4 projects). Please note that due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

3.4.2 Action to Create, Restore or Manage Wildlife-rich Wetland and Coastal Habitats

Three projects completed action to create or restore wildlife-rich wetland and coastal habitats, with a total of 1.9 hectares to be wildlife-rich as a result of the SSF (Table 3.11 below). The majority of the area (1.1 hectares) was restored, with a smaller portion (0.8 hectares) created.

Table 3.11: Area of wildlife-rich habitats likely created and restored in wetland and coastal habitats

Broad Habitat	Area of creation activities (ha)	Area of restoration activities (ha)	Total area (ha)
Fen marsh and swamp	0.8	1.1	1.9
Total Area	0.8	1.1	1.9

Base: Spatial Data (N=4 projects). Please note that due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

3.4.3 Ecological Review

Actions targeting fen, marsh, and swamp habitats were performed by one project. These included the creation of three gripes (drainage trench) and two ditches to improve foraging and breeding opportunities for wetland birds, as well as two muddy margins aimed at increasing habitat diversity for plants and invertebrates. These actions were all rated high confidence by the grantee, which this review agrees, recognising them as effective strategies for improving wetland bird habitat, and supporting a wider array of wetland biodiversity.

In lowland fens, a suite of restoration actions was undertaken by one project. This involved the removal of encroaching willow scrub and accumulated litter thatch, along with reconnecting the fen to the river and lowering the ground level to increase inundation. These interventions are expected to improve sward diversity and help re-wet the site, thereby enhancing conditions for fen species. The project team expressed high confidence in these actions, a view echoed by this review, which recognises their effectiveness in halting succession, improving the water table, and supporting a broader range of species.

A different project focused on purple moor grass and rush pastures. The strategy involves the use of fencing to protect watercourses and to create wildlife corridors. The fencing helps manage livestock access, preventing trampling and erosion of watercourse banks, while still allowing grazing necessary for pasture maintenance. It also protects ground-nesting birds and other sensitive wildlife. This review agrees there is a high level of confidence in the success of this approach, as these are known methods of increasing biodiversity and watercourse quality.

Reedbed restoration work was also undertaken by another project. Actions included removing encroaching scrub, cleaning and lowering springs, and lowering the reedbed to reconnect it with the water table. These aim to improve the condition of the reedbed from poor to moderate, enhancing its suitability for a wide range of birds, fish, and invertebrates. The project team and this review rate the confidence as high, due to the ecological value and sensitivity of reedbed systems, and the proven actions applied.

Two wetland habitat creation projects under the category of 'Other Wetlands' were undertaken whereby, a stream was diverted by one project, creating scrapes, bunds, and incorporating woody debris. This action creates microhabitats suitable for amphibians, wading birds, and invertebrates, and is expected to promote a more diverse plant community. Tree hinging techniques were used by the second project to alter flow paths and reconnect the river with its floodplain. This will increase habitat complexity and resilience while reducing erosion. Both actions were considered highly effective by the project teams and this review.

3.4.4 Perceived Project Impact on Wetland and Coastal Habitats

Reflecting on the early and emerging impact of wetland and coastal actions in workshops, project staff reported a range of broad emerging impacts. Similarly to activity on river and lake habitats, where ponds have been created or restored on wetland and coastal habitats, project staff reported quick and visible impacts on wildlife:

'Lots of frog spawn, owls, badgers and foxes have been caught on camera using these ponds. Projects take time to settle down and get to their best point but 6 months in we're seeing revegetation, biodiversity and our monitoring is showing that water is holding on site.' **(Reflective workshop response)**

Where sites have been rewetted and/or vegetation such as reedbeds have been managed this has also commonly resulted in the sites attracting a range of species e.g. bitterns. This, staff suggested, demonstrates the early successes evident within their delivery.

As highlighted in Section 2.2.2, many grantees reported that actions during the first year of SSF delivery have primarily focused on infrastructure-based interventions and capital works. This includes the implementation of water control systems and the reconnection of habitats such as coastal rivers, floodplains, and water tables. Staff noted that these actions have enhanced the functionality of wetland habitats, particularly by improving site resilience to climate pressures, including drought.

In turn, this has considerably influenced how landowners and delivery partners are able to use and manage these sites:

‘Opening the doors for landowners to use the water they have in more sustainable way was great. So often you are at the mercy of how much water, sun, wind you get. We have done a lot of infrastructure work that helps landowners to use the water they have, especially in dry years. We must manage resource we have, to control where the water goes to help habitats that are most affected. It was a great impact short term and tangible around the infrastructure work.’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

As with other habitat types, project staff reported that key impact measures, such as water quality, will require a longer timeframe to assess meaningfully. The ongoing monitoring of activity is explored in further detail in Section 3.5 below.

3.5 Skills and Capacity Building

Within workshops, project staff reported that SSF has provided sufficient resources to carry out species and habitat surveys throughout the duration of the project, enabling them to monitor the impact of their project delivery. Staff welcomed this aspect of the funding, noting that similar programmes often do not allocate adequate resources to support both the delivery of activity and its effective monitoring.

As highlighted in Section 2.2.3, over half of all training delivered to date within SSF projects has focused on technical and task-specific skills (54%, 85/158), including areas such as ecological surveying. Staff reflected that equipping staff and volunteers with these skills has strengthened their capacity to undertake long-term monitoring of sites. This capability is, in itself, a meaningful impact of SSF and will enable grantees and partners to continue measuring the long-term ecological benefits of their work. Many staff also noted that this aspect of project delivery has helped them to begin considering and implementing sustainability planning at an early stage:

The continued monitoring is one of the key benefits of this funding, as it includes a five-year period for post-project management and assessment. This long-term monitoring is invaluable in ensuring that the project's objectives are being met [...]. The ongoing assessment will allow us to track whether the baseline condition is improving as expected. If improvements are not being made, we can then work with landowners to develop a new plan, which may include capital investment or adjustments to the management approach, particularly regarding the planned habitat.' **(Reflective workshop response)**

In some cases, project staff said that this was the first time some of their sites had ever been surveyed and so, as a result, local stakeholders did not know what was there to protect and others described being able to harness volunteer capacity, training them to conduct species and habitat surveys. With established baselines, project staff suggested this volunteer capacity should ensure that they can measure the impact of habitat-based activity over the medium to longer-term.

Partnership working was identified during workshops as a notable impact of SSF on grantee organisations to date, both strategically and practically. In several cases, staff reflected that collaboration with key partner organisations had encouraged them to think more strategically about their work, how they engage with sites, who they work with, and how this can influence wider stakeholders, including landowners and farmers. For example, one project reported that working with a new partner enabled them to engage local farmers, fostering more trusting and effective relationships across stakeholders that had not previously existed.

Where staff reflected on the strategic value of partnership working within SSF, many noted that it has strengthened existing relationships and prompted joint exploration of future funding opportunities to continue working together beyond the life of the programme.

In addition, project staff highlighted that the exchange of learning and expertise between partners has been another key impact of SSF to date. As outlined above, this approach is expected to play an important role in supporting the long-term success of project activity and its monitoring:

'The partnership working has created a lasting legacy. One of our partners has been delivering training and upskilling in species identification for all of our partners and their volunteers. This is a valuable contribution, as the skills gained will hopefully endure and generate long-term interest in wildlife recording. Additionally, these strengthened partnerships will support future funding bids, enabling us to continue this important work.' **(Reflective workshop response)**

3.6 Connecting People with Nature

As highlighted in Section 2.2.4, many projects reported that their efforts to engage people and connect them to nature have helped build strong relationships with local communities and groups. This work has enabled project staff to identify a range of early impacts, including engaging new audiences, recruiting new volunteers, and strengthening the ongoing involvement of established volunteer networks.

Project staff frequently described community engagement as a key impact of their SSF activity to date. They reported that local enthusiasm for specific sites and activities has already resulted in a variety of benefits, including improved individual wellbeing through participation in site-based activities and a growing sense of long-term interest in and care for project sites:

‘It is not only species survival but also heritage of the project. Working with local groups establishing these partnerships is a great impact going forward beyond the lifetime of the project. A lot of the project is happening in the deprived areas, very urban, we are getting positive impact from people, people just coming in to see what you’re doing.’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

‘The full benefit of this approach will become clearer over time, but we’re already seeing some impact, especially in how people are responding to the site. Local residents have been stopping us to comment on how good the place looks. Whether people fully understand the technical side of it or not doesn’t really matter, what matters is that they feel like someone is finally looking after the site.’ **(Reflective workshop response)**

This connection between people and place is expected to play an important role in the sustainability and legacy of project outcomes. Project staff commonly reported that they expect growing public and volunteer engagement to lead to increased long-term care for the sites, stronger volunteer capacity, and broader support for their protection and conservation.

4 Conclusions and Recommendations

This interim report for the SSF illustrates that good early progress has been made across the portfolio of funded projects, with evidence indicating that impacts are emerging after the first year of delivery. This section provides an overview of key findings from this report and emerging recommendations for the next stage of this evaluation and future programmes where appropriate.

4.1 Process

Findings from the Wave 1 survey confirm that SSF has met a clear need in the sector, particularly for funding large-scale, landscape-based interventions. Grantees commonly identified habitat restoration or creation in areas perceived as underfunded, particularly rivers and mixed landscapes, as their primary motivation for applying. This aligns with feedback gathered during the scoping phase of the evaluation, where stakeholders emphasised the importance of SSF's role in addressing gaps in funding for some habitats.

Overall, grantees were broadly positive about the application process. Most agreed that it was clear and proportionate to the scale of funding. Some grantees suggested that a longer application window could improve partner engagement and project planning. However, this needs to be weighed against the risks of extended development periods and the potential for overinvestment prior to award.

Within the Wave 1 survey, 18 of 20 projects reported that their project delivery is progressing well. Many grantees described being able to initiate delivery rapidly due in part to preparatory work, such as securing landowner agreements and establishing delivery partnerships, completed ahead of the funding award. Projects have now completed key early-stage activities as anticipated, including woodland management, wetland enhancement, pond creation, hedge planting, and invasive species removal.

Across all project types, effective governance, clear communication structures, and strong working relationships with local stakeholders have supported timely and efficient delivery. Hands-on volunteer support has also played a central role in this phase, allowing project staff to reduce the workload for the core project teams and focus budget on other project activities.

Common challenges to project delivery have included seasonal constraints e.g. adverse weather, delays in obtaining statutory consents, contractor availability, and rising delivery costs. Whilst projects have largely been able to overcome these challenges, it is important to recognise that extreme weather is likely to continue to pose challenges to project delivery and post-project monitoring and management as a result of climate change. Cost inflation was also a concern, with some projects requesting approval to access inflationary contingencies. Whilst these are expected challenges for environmental capital delivery programmes, future programmes funding ambitious and/or landscape scale activity should extend the delivery timeframe to a minimum of three years. This will help grantees to mitigate weather-related risks and provide more time to effectively engage landowners and communities and secure statutory consents.

Reflecting on what worked well for project actions on habitats, grantees and staff reported that SSF's upfront investment and flexibility enabled the kind of coordinated and seasonal work (e.g. tree planting, fish migration improvements) that is often not feasible under short-term or fragmented funding models. These conditions have allowed grantees to embed long-term resilience into their projects through infrastructure that supports natural processes and habitat connectivity aligned with the Lawton Principles ('bigger, better, more joined up').

The SSF has also made a meaningful contribution to building capacity within the sector. To date, the programme has supported 144 roles (1098.6 FTE) across 19 organisations, with 57% of these roles newly created. Whilst some recruitment challenges were reported, mainly due to short-term contracts, most projects successfully assembled skilled delivery teams, often combining experienced and early-career staff to support knowledge transfer and on-the-job training. It is, however, important to consider that many of these jobs are fixed-term. This will be further explored in the final phase of reporting to understand the long-term impacts on organisational capacity and the retention of staff knowledge and expertise.

Grantees have responded to SSF's connecting people with nature priority with diverse and impactful engagement strategies. By January 2025, 19 projects had delivered 358 public events, reaching over 11,493 participants. These events ranged from workshops, large-scale events and oral history interviews to guided walks and family nature days, reflecting the breadth of approaches enabled by the programme. Project staff also addressed common barriers to participation, such as inaccessible sites, transport, or complex registration processes, through practical interventions like improved access to facilities and streamlined digital sign-ups.

4.2 Impact

By January 2025, the SSF-funded projects have delivered ecological works across 205.2 hectares of habitat. This comprises of habitat creation action (33.8 hectares; 16%), habitat restoration (127.4 hectares; 62%), and habitat management (43.9 hectares; 21%). Overall, woodlands were the most worked on habitat (131.2 hectares; 64%), allowing for long-term ecological gains that may become more evident with time and ongoing management. As part of the action taken on habitats, 104.3 hectares have been reviewed as likely to contribute to the statutory wildlife-rich habitat target through SSF project activity by January 2025. This is 51% of the project area completed so far. Restoration activities make up most of this contribution (95.6 hectares; 92%).

Of the 104.3 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat created or restored, woodland and forest habitats made up the majority (55.2 hectares; 53%), followed by rivers and lakes (24.5 hectares; 24%), grasslands (22.7 hectares; 22%), and wetland (1.9 hectares; 2%). Woodland restoration (52.7 hectares) is the key driver for reporting towards the statutory target.

Project activities typically employed established ecological interventions, such as re-meandering rivers, wetland creation, removal of invasive species, and restoration of natural light and hydrological regimes. These activities are consistent with best-practice conservation approaches and often align with those considered highly effective in restoring ecosystem function and supporting biodiversity. Confidence in outcomes is generally high, both from project teams and through this ecological review. Many interventions, particularly those that re-establish natural processes, increase habitat complexity, or remove key ecological pressures, were assessed as having a strong likelihood of success.

Alongside the ecological review, project staff have frequently reported early wildlife responses to habitat improvements and the visible changes in habitats. Across all types of habitat delivery, project staff reported that these are encouraging signs, indicating that project activity is being delivered successfully so far. However, staff did also recognise that full ecological impacts, particularly those related to species recovery and water quality, will require a longer timeframe to assess meaningfully.

Staff reported that building skills among project teams and volunteers has enhanced their capacity to carry out long-term site monitoring. In several cases, sites were surveyed for the first time, enabling grantees and local stakeholders to better understand what exists and what requires protection. Many projects used this opportunity to train volunteers in monitoring techniques, helping to build long-term, community-based capacity for ecological monitoring. This strengthened capability represents a key impact of SSF, supporting grantees and partners to continue assessing ecological outcomes beyond the funded period. Additionally, the focus on capacity building has prompted many projects to begin considering and implementing sustainability planning from an early stage.

Staff have also commonly described community engagement as a key impact of SSF project activity to date. In some cases, staff have noted that local enthusiasm has, or is anticipated to, translate into improved site stewardship and care for project sites. This relationship between people and nature is expected to contribute to the long-term sustainability of project outcomes and requires further exploration within subsequent phases of the evaluation.

4.3 Recommendations and Next Steps

Based on the key findings from this report, a number of recommendations for future similar funding initiatives are provided below:

1. Adverse weather conditions, including extreme events linked to climate change, have been a common cause of project delays within SSF. Given the increasing severity and frequency of adverse weather conditions, future environmental initiatives should extend delivery timeframes to a minimum of three years and include a clearly defined project planning phase. This is particularly important for projects that are ambitious or delivered at a landscape scale. This would result in a range of benefits. For example, many habitat activities are seasonally dependent and can only be delivered under suitable weather conditions, therefore more time would allow grantees to better adapt delivery based on weather events outside of their control. Additionally, longer delivery timeframes would help to mitigate weather-related risks and allow grantees more time to effectively engage landowners and communities and secure statutory consents. Extending delivery windows will also help ensure that programme expectations are responsive to the external challenges faced by grantees.
2. Given the generally positive feedback on the application process, the current application timelines should be retained for future similar programmes. Retaining this approach helps minimise the risk of applicants overcommitting resources prior to funding decisions. However, where the delivery period is less than two years, future funding initiatives should consider encouraging applicants to secure landowner consents, or consent in principle, prior to project award to help prevent delivery delays. It is recognised that doing so may require an extension to the application window.
3. The integration of species and habitat monitoring within project delivery has been a key success of the SSF, strengthening the capacity of grantees and partner organisations to carry out long-term site monitoring. Future initiatives should continue to encourage applicants to embed habitat and species monitoring within their project plans and consider including ringfenced funding to support this activity where needed. This approach will help ensure the collection of more consistent, robust evidence across the sector and support long-term impact assessment.

This interim evaluation has examined SSF project progress during the first year of delivery. The second phase will assess progress over the second year, explore the anticipated longer-term impacts of project activity, and evaluate the overall value for money of the SSF. The following actions for further consideration have been identified based on findings from this phase of the evaluation. These will be taken forward by the evaluation and programme teams in the final phase of the evaluation:

1. The evaluation and programme teams will review guidance and processes relating to the collection of equalities data to ensure that grantees feel supported and confident in providing this information.
2. To better capture the variety and depth of public engagement, the evaluation team will review the categories and accompanying guidance provided to projects for reporting engagement activity.
3. Given the considerable number of trees planted during the first year of delivery, the evaluation and programme teams will review how tree planting data is currently being captured through monitoring and spatial data systems.
4. Several emerging themes, such as procurement processes and partnership working, would benefit from further analysis by organisation size and type. The evaluation team will review consent procedures to enable, where appropriate, more detailed exploration of delivery strengths and challenges within a clearer organisational context.

Annex A: Technical Annex

Habitat Approach

This section outlines the approach taken to reporting on the impact on habitats for projects funded through the SSF. This includes both reporting against the statutory target for wildlife-rich habitat and wider impact on habitats.

The habitat target is action-based rather than outcome-based (quality) and relies on the assumption that habitats of sufficient quality will be restored if the correct actions are undertaken. Only action taken to create or restore wildlife-rich habitats will contribute to the target – definitions of habitat creation, restoration and management can be found in the [Annex B](#). The target also excludes action taken on protected sites and the replacement of habitat destroyed after 30th January 2023 (e.g. compensatory habitat through Biodiversity Net Gain/nutrient mitigation schemes). Further detail on the statutory target can be found in [Environment Act Habitat Target – Definitions and Descriptions - TIN219 \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](#).

This ecological evaluation focuses on reviewing whether these actions are likely to lead to the creation or restoration of wildlife-rich habitat. Expert judgement was used to assess whether the interventions are expected to produce habitat of sufficient quality to support species.

To assess ‘appropriate action,’ the evaluation was based on ecological factors, such as baseline habitat condition, the reported action type, and whether the actions matched those reported. In addition, management factors were considered including the project team's expertise, long-term management plans, and how risks are addressed.

Data collection

The primary data sources for assessing progress towards the statutory habitat target are the spatial datasets and Monitoring information submitted by funded projects at the interim reporting stages. Spatial data, provided in the form of shapefiles, included details on habitat type, location, and specific actions undertaken. These data were shared with Wavehill and Environment Systems by the Heritage Fund and were expected to follow defined data standards and guidance.

In addition to habitat action data, projects submitted qualitative Monitoring information covering activities related to employment and skills, public engagement with nature, and other habitat-related efforts not captured spatially. This non-spatial information offered context on project delivery, risks, mitigation strategies, and management planning. While not directly used in the statutory target calculations, it was valuable in assessing the likely effectiveness of actions and building confidence in long-term outcomes.

Further insight was gained by triangulating spatial data with the wider evaluation material. This broader evidence base supported understanding of implementation processes, site conditions, and the likelihood that actions would result in wildlife-rich habitats of ‘good’ condition that could contribute to statutory targets. Projects were also invited, though not required, to submit additional ecological data such as habitat condition assessments. When provided, these data supported and enhanced the analysis by offering further detail on habitat quality and restoration progress.

Figure A.1 visualises the approach to reporting against the statutory target, including the stages required to collate, process and analyse the spatial data. Each step in this infographic is described in further detail in the sections below. The steps set out below also show the ownership of each action or stage, from the collecting of the data by the Heritage Fund, the scrutiny of habitat and action taken by Environment Systems, and the final data analysis conducted by Wavehill.

Figure A.1: Infographic showing the approach to habitat impact



Step 1: Data Standards

An internal review and pre-processing of the spatial data was performed to ensure that there were no overlapping polygons or duplicate entries, that the polygons met the relevant minimum mapping unit (25 m²), and that polylines were converted to polygons and easily distinguishable.

Step 2: Data Validation

The ecological data submitted by SSF-funded projects was reviewed to assess the accuracy of reported baseline habitats and to determine whether the actions delivered were appropriately classified by project ecologists as habitat creation, restoration, or management. [Environment Act Habitat Target – Definitions and Descriptions - TIN219](#) sets out the desired outcomes for wildlife-rich habitat as aligned to PHI definitions and/or Biodiversity Net Gain Condition Assessments. All baseline and target habitat entries were reviewed and, where necessary, translated into appropriate UKHab habitat classes.

The review of actions involved:

- Auditing the baseline habitat conditions reported by applicants and comparing these with the actions undertaken.
- Verifying whether the actions taken were consistent with the reported action type.
- Raising queries with project teams in cases where discrepancies or uncertainties were identified.
- If required, applying expert judgement in instances where responses were unclear or unavailable, considering the full context of the application, including stated aims, objectives, location, and supporting documentation.

An internal confidence rating was applied to reflect the level of certainty in each assessment.

Step 3: Data Cleaning

As part of the data preparation process, the spatial dataset was further refined to ensure alignment with the criteria for statutory habitat targets. This involved identifying and excluding certain categories of habitat actions that are not eligible for inclusion. Specifically, actions located on legally protected sites (Annex B) were separated, as interventions on these areas do not contribute towards the statutory target. This preparation step ensured that the dataset could accurately differentiate between those habitat actions that are genuinely contributing to net habitat gain as defined by current policy.

Please note, that actions carried out on habitats that do not meet the requirements of the statutory target will still be included in the reporting of all SSF-funded action.

Step 4: Data Triangulation

Following the spatial delivery of project data, further information was collated from a range of sources to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how each project was delivered and the likely outcomes. This triangulation included qualitative data drawn from project reports, attended workshops, and supporting documentation provided by grantees. This focused on understanding key elements of delivery such as site selection, the practical implementation of actions, and the maintenance commitments post-grant.

An important part of this review was how grantees identified and managed ecological risks and challenges. These include site-specific constraints, uncertainties on habitat response, and potential barriers to long-term success. The analysis considered how these risks were acknowledged, mitigated, or monitored, as part of the project design and implementation.

Grantees were also asked to provide a qualitative categorical confidence level regarding the likelihood that their completed actions would result in wildlife-rich habitat of 'good' condition. This self-assessment reflects professional judgement and is grounded in expert knowledge, site experience, and awareness of any limitations or outstanding dependencies. Although subjective, these confidence levels offer valuable insight into how projects perceive their ecological outcomes and complement the ecological desk-based review. Where relevant, insights gathered during grantee workshops were used to contextualise or corroborate confidence statements, particularly in relation to team expertise, long-term vision, and planned stewardship beyond the funded period.

Together, this triangulated evidence base supports a more nuanced understanding of habitat action effectiveness and strengthens the reliability of the evaluation in assessing likely contributions to statutory habitat targets.

Step 5: Confidence Assessment

The ecological review focused on evaluating the target habitats and the range of actions undertaken to create, restore, or manage existing habitats in line with the stated project objectives. Each polygon in the spatial dataset was individually reviewed to assess the appropriateness and suitability of the actions implemented. This process involved confirming whether the actions aligned with the intended ecological outcomes and flagging any anomalies or inconsistencies.

Where discrepancies were flagged, these were cross-checked against available non-spatial data to provide further context. The non-spatial project data, such as the project team's approaches to risk management and long-term management planning, was used to provide an additional layer of confidence. In cases where uncertainty remained, clarification was sought directly with project staff to gather additional information. This ensured a more robust understanding of project intentions and implementation on the ground.

Furthermore, participation in project workshops by the ecological specialists offered valuable insights into the management teams' level of commitment, strategic vision, and capacity to maintain conservation activities beyond the lifetime of the fund. This helped address concerns regarding the risks associated with the sustainability and continuity of management efforts.

Therefore, the wildlife-rich habitat target is action-based, requiring a record of the area of land on which 'appropriate action' has been taken to restore or create habitat. The ecological evaluation approach is concerned with 'appropriate action' and aims to identify if actions undertaken are 'reasonably expected to lead' to the creation/restoration of wildlife-rich habitat and thereby improving the prospects for species. Expert judgement was used to evaluate baseline conditions and actions taken to form an opinion if the actions will lead to habitat of 'sufficient quality'. The evaluation approach relied on information gathered through geo-spatial templates and questionnaires.

The underlying rationale framing the questions and data sought from projects to evaluate 'appropriate action' is based on the premise that successful habitat creation and restoration depends on a comprehensive approach that integrates many factors ranging from ecological, management, and social factors.

The approach to the review was guided by the Environment Act Habitat Target – Definitions and Descriptions The actions included as restoration or creation are those that establish wildlife-rich habitat on land or water where such habitat is currently absent. Actions should result in an increased extent of wildlife-rich habitat, not improved condition of existing wildlife-rich habitat.

Therefore, the information sought by the ecology evaluation are presented under these headings:

Ecological Factors

- The baseline habitat condition and if that correlated to wildlife-rich habitat as defined by the Defra guidance
- Category of action reported; restoration or creation, or management
- Confirming if the actions taken correlate with the action type reported

Management Factors

- Experience & expertise of the project teams
- Long term management and
- Managing risk

Where projects did not provide sufficient detail over the action taken to deliver habitat creation/restoration/management, projects were approached to seek further clarification. Where this clarification was not possible, then a precautionary approach was adopted, and the actions were excluded from the interim reporting of statutory target calculations. At this interim stage, when further detail is provided, these actions will be re-considered as they may still deliver wildlife-rich habitats.

Step 6: Data Analysis

All of the desk-based and confidence reviews were performed within the spatial dataset in a GIS software, in order to calculate the area of each polygon and every action performed, as well as the distance of each linear action. The reviewed data was combined with shapefiles delineating protected sites, and the regions of England, in order to extract the spatial distribution of actions completed in these areas. The full database of attributes was exported into Excel in order to aggregate the areas based on the action type, the regions, the current wildlife-rich status, and the protected status for inclusion in the metric reporting.

Reporting on the connectivity of the actions will be performed on delivery of the final stage of the evaluation, where further progress has been made to deliver joined up action on habitats.

Methodological Limitations

A key limitation is the reliance on project-submitted data, such as qualitative Monitoring information, where the information can vary depending on the expertise of the project teams, interpretation of guidance, and the clarity of reporting. In some cases, baseline habitat types, condition, or action types were missing or inconsistently described, requiring inference or assumption by the reviewing ecologists. This introduces the risk of misclassification, which may lead to over- or underestimation of progress toward the statutory target.

The absence of ground observation is a factor. The desk-based nature of the review means that habitat condition and ecological suitability rely on documentation and self-assessment, rather than on-site ecological surveys. Without field verification, it is not possible to fully understand the site conditions, the contextual surrounding landscape, or the condition of the area before and after the action.

The classification of actions into creation, restoration, or management categories can present a challenge. Whilst definitions exist, they are not always clearly delineated in practice. Distinctions between the three can be blurred, particularly in cases of ongoing management. While the review applied expert judgement to interpret ambiguous cases, it can introduce subjectivity, where different reviewers might reach different conclusions when presented with the same information.

An internal confidence scoring system was used to reflect the level of certainty in the assessments. However, these scores, together with the confidence levels provided by grantees, are qualitative and subjective. They are based on professional judgement, project documentation, and knowledge of site conditions, rather than quantitative metrics. As a result, assessments of likely outcomes and the reliability of reported data carry a degree of interpretive risk.

Annex B: Definitions

The Defra and Natural England April 2024 paper [Environment Act Habitat Target – Definitions and Descriptions](#) sets out how the Environment Improvement Plan (EIP23) habitat targets will be measured. The targets are:

- To restore or create more than 500,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitats outside of protected sites by 2042.
- To restore or create 140,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitats outside protected sites by 2028 (interim target outlined in the EIP23)

Key definitions from this paper are outlined below.

Types of habitat

Wildlife-rich habitat refers to any of a range of specific natural and semi-natural habitats found in England. It is based on Priority Habitats and is expanded to include other habitat types listed in Schedule 1 of the Environmental Targets Regulations 2023.

Relict habitat refers to small, fragmented, remnant patches of wildlife-rich habitat in an area where the habitat in question would previously have been more widespread, or where the surrounding habitat is not currently considered wildlife-rich.

Degraded habitat no longer exhibits the required level of natural functioning and consequently no longer supports the typical flora and fauna expected in that habitat. The impacts on natural functioning can be the addition of nutrients and chemicals, changes to the hydrological regime, intensive vegetation control, modifications to the physical or soil environment or biological pressures such as invasive non-native species, stocking and diseases. Below is an outline of those habitats that may be considered degraded:

- any existing habitat developed on drained peat where hydrological restoration is required to restore the peat.
- freshwater, coastal and estuarine habitats affected by pollution, physical modifications or damage, impacted hydrological regimes and invasive non-native species (INNS) where the aim is to remove these adverse pressures to facilitate restoration to a more natural state which would be considered wildlife-rich.
- native woodland habitats including those on ancient woodland sites with non-native tree species where the aim is to reduce the cover of the non-native canopy trees to establish a wildlife-rich habitat.
- existing terrestrial habitats currently not listed as wildlife-rich where the objective is to develop the site into a wildlife-rich habitat, or the restoration of a wildlife-rich habitat from woodland through the Forestry Commission's open habitat policy including removal of conifers on coastal sand dunes.

- existing terrestrial semi-natural habitats behind sea defences where the primary aim of restoration involves the restoration of coastal processes including re-alignment allowing saline inundation, cliff erosion or the removal of defences to allow roll-back of sand dune systems. Action here needs to be of sufficient scale to distinguish this from improvements to on-site management.

Quality of Habitat Type

The term '**sufficient quality**' relates to the ultimate condition of the habitat developed. The SI defines 'sufficient quality' as

'...habitat [...] which is of sufficient quality that it is, or will be, capable of supporting flora and fauna which are typically found in the habitats in question'.

To be considered as 'sufficient quality,' all the actions that need to be taken for a habitat to reach this quality must be implemented but habitat recovery as a response may be ongoing.

This is an action-based target, and habitat condition will not be assessed. Those actions under schemes which we reasonably expect to lead to the restoration or creation of wildlife-rich habitat will count towards the target.

For priority habitats what is meant by sufficient quality is generally set out within the priority habitat descriptions and for those habitats included within the BNG Metric the aim would be to meet 'good condition'.

Some wildlife-rich habitats of coastal waters are not covered by priority habitat or BNG; instead, the JNCC Marine or the EUNIS habitat classification is used to understand sufficient quality.

For river and lake habitats the 25 Year Environment Plan indicator B6 and the naturalness assessment published on the Freshwater Biological Association website can be used to understand what is meant by sufficient quality.

Habitat Restoration and Creation

The actions included as **restoration** or **creation** are those that establish wildlife-rich habitat on land or water where such habitat is currently absent. Actions should result in an increased extent of wildlife-rich habitat, not improved condition of existing wildlife-rich habitat. Restoration and creation will not need to be reported separately for this target.

Habitat restoration and **creation action** is differentiated from improvements to on-site management in that it leads to an increase in the extent of wildlife-rich habitat. To be considered restoration or creation, action should not occur on wildlife-rich habitat that currently meets any of the habitat definitions. Any exceptions are listed as degraded habitat.

Habitat restoration refers to:

- action on sites which support relict habitat that leads to the expansion of wildlife-rich habitat. Examples would include where fragments of wildlife-rich habitat remain and action on land or water surrounding these fragments re-establishes the habitat, increasing the total extent of the wildlife-rich habitat. Only the newly established habitat will be counted towards the target.
- action on degraded habitat where single or multiple actions need to be undertaken to address on or off-site pressures so that wildlife-rich habitats of sufficient quality can become established, e.g. addressing nutrient enrichment and invasive non-native species pressures to restore a lake.
- action on existing habitat (possibly wildlife-rich) that has developed in a degraded ecosystem; consequently, the existing habitat may be considered degraded. Examples include the restoration of blanket bog from dry heath on drained peat, or action to reduce grazing pressure on upland acid grassland to restore priority habitat such as upland heath or upland oakwood.

Habitat creation refers to the actions to establish wildlife-rich habitats that are of sufficient quality to support the species that are typically found in that habitat.

Actions to address degraded habitat includes actions to address a range of different aspects of natural ecosystem function. These can be actions to redress adverse impacts of human modifications or less interventionist measures based on promoting natural processes. The former can include grip blocking or restoration of ancient woodland on plantation sites, whilst the latter could include natural recolonisation, managed re-alignment or re-instatement of natural drainage. These examples can be relevant to both 'restoration' of existing degraded habitats and 'creation' of additional new habitats.

Particularly, when promoting natural processes, the precise habitat type that will develop may be unknown. The SI allows for the reporting of dynamic mosaics of wildlife-rich habitats that can develop through the restoration of natural processes and ecosystems, where the exact outcomes of actions will not be known.

Actions that will not count as restoration or creation

Habitat management includes actions that are intended to maintain or enhance existing wildlife-rich habitat and may follow those specific actions related to restoration and creation. It is recognised that, whilst these actions to improve the condition, structure or composition of existing wildlife-rich habitats will be important in delivering statutory species targets and are to be encouraged, they are out of scope of this habitat target.

Protected Sites

Actions within protected sites which were designated on or before 30th January 2023 do not count towards the targets. Actions taking place on future designated protected sites are counted, as are actions on land surrounding protected sites, which is encouraged.

Protected sites are defined as:

- European sites
 - Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)
 - Special Protection Areas (SPAs)
- Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)
- Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs)

