

Species Survival Fund Final Report

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List of abbreviations

25YEP - 25 Year Environmental Plan

BNG - Biodiversity Net Gain

Defra - Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

eDNA - Environmental DNA

EIP - Environmental Improvement Plan

eNGO - Environmental Non-governmental Organisation

FCR - Full Cost Recovery

FiPL - Farming in Protected Landscapes

FSC - Field Studies Council

FTE - Full Time Equivalent

GIS - Geographic Information Systems

INNS - Invasive Non-Native Species

IUCN - International Union for Conservation of Nature

LNRS - Local Nature Recovery Strategies

MoRPh - Modular River Physical Assessment

NAO - National Audit Office

NE - Natural England

ONS - Office for National Statistics

PHI - Priority Habitat Inventory

RRA - Rapid Rainforest Assessment

RSPB - Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

SEN - Special Educational Needs

SIC - Standard Industrial Classification

SSSI - Site of Special Scientific Interest

SSF - Species Survival Fund

TCV - The Conservation Volunteers

UKHab - UK Habitat Classification System

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Executive Summary

The Species Survival Fund (SSF) was 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 was delivered in England with input from the Environment Agency and Natural England. Its primary goal was to support species recovery through habitat restoration and creation, making early progress towards UK Government [statutory targets for species abundance and the restoration and creation of wildlife-rich habitats](#) (referred to collectively as the statutory Biodiversity Targets).

Through 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 were required to deliver against the core theme of habitat creation and restoration to support species abundance. Additional SSF priorities included creating joined-up spaces for nature, aligning with local nature recovery 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 concluded in February 2026, with a five-year post-delivery maintenance period. Projects are located across most English regions.

This final evaluation report draws on:

- A survey of all 20 projects.
- Site visits to all 20 projects.
- Fifteen workshops with 91 staff across all 20 projects.
- In-depth interviews with project managers across all 20 projects.
- Analysis of end of project monitoring data.
- Ecological assessment of spatial data by ecologists, Environment Systems.

It is important to note that the statutory wildlife-rich habitat target is action-based rather than outcome-based, following the approach set out by Defra and Natural England in the [Environment Act Habitat Target Reporting Data Model and Standard](#) (TIN223). This approach assumes that appropriate actions will lead to habitats of sufficient quality over time. The statutory habitat target was set in early 2023 and the definitions required to report against it were not published until after SSF project awards had been made (Summer 2023). This meant that neither fund design nor project planning could fully account for what activity would ultimately count towards the target.

Delivery, Enablers and Challenges

Most grantees reported that they had met or exceeded their projects' original targets by the end of SSF, with a wide range of effective practice evident across all three themes of benefits to nature, skills and capacity building, and connecting people with nature. For most projects, delivery was more concentrated in the final year than

originally planned, largely because of delays in year one around statutory consents, landowner agreements and recruitment of staff, apprentices and trainees. Once these were in place, delivery often progressed quickly, with teams working to narrow seasonal windows and managing multiple sites or contractors simultaneously.

Key enablers for effective delivery included:

- Existing partnership working with landowners, contractors and community groups, enabling faster delivery once permissions were in place.
- Flexibility to adapt plans, switch sites and make use of underspend where original plans became impractical.
- Favourable weather conditions in the final year, helping projects recover earlier delays.
- The Heritage Fund's willingness to support variations and change requests, identified by grantees as essential to maintaining outputs within a compressed timeframe.

Key challenges included:

- Delays to statutory consents and landowner agreements, which compressed delivery timelines and pushed activity into the final year.
- Seasonal constraints on habitat works, limiting when certain activities could take place and reducing the window available to recover earlier delays.
- Staff turnover on fixed-term contracts, creating continuity and handover pressures particularly toward the end of project delivery.
- Bureaucracy within local authority systems and complex partnership arrangements, which in some cases slowed delivery.

Benefits to Nature

SSF funded 20 projects across England who delivered a total of **4,800 hectares of habitat action** across England, comprising:

- **654 hectares** of habitat creation (14%)
- **686 hectares** of habitat restoration (14%)
- **3,460 hectares** of habitat under active management (72%)

Early indications suggest that approximately 16% of this habitat action will count towards the statutory habitat target, representing a considerable contribution to national biodiversity commitments and an additional benefit of the programme alongside the total habitat action delivered. Official reporting towards the statutory habitat target will be produced by Defra as part of the Biodiversity Indicators.

Projects delivered habitat action across a wide range of types, including river restoration, leaky dam installation, scrub clearance, pond creation and invasive species control. Tree planting was a visible and volunteer-friendly activity, with **124,062 broadleaf** and **3,480 coniferous trees** planted across 18 projects. Habitat action also included **2,303 small-scale actions** across 15 projects. Small actions are defined as discrete targeted actions too small to map as an area, such as

installing nest boxes, creating small ponds and building habitat features. A total of **3,596 habitat and species surveys** were also completed across the programme. Habitat connectivity was delivered through physical links including fish and eel passes, weir removals and hedgerow planting, as well as stepping-stone habitats across landscapes where continuous corridors were not achievable.

Early signs of greater ecological activity were reported across all habitat types by programme close, including:

- Fish spawning on restored gravels.
- Rare breeding birds at newly created wetlands.
- Target species confirmed on new sites.
- Great crested newts breeding at one site for the first time in a decade.
- Water tables rising measurably at rewetted sites, with wetland features already contributing to downstream flood risk reduction.

Project staff consistently expected the full ecological value of works to emerge over three to five years, with wetland and coastal works showing the quickest visible response and woodland recovery expected to take considerably longer.

Skills and Capacity Building

SSF supported a total of **197 roles (135.7 FTE)** throughout its lifetime, of which 52% were newly created, including **19 traineeships and 8 apprenticeships**. The programme also engaged **13,097 volunteers**, of which **3,891 (30%) were first-time volunteers**.

- Of the people employed in newly created roles, 73% remained in the environmental sector at programme close, indicating the programme made a positive contribution to environmental workforce capacity. However, only 9 of the newly created roles were permanent, suggesting SSF supported short-term delivery capacity and sector entry more than sustained job creation.
- Training was wide-ranging and closely tied to day-to-day delivery, with 'learning by doing' the most commonly cited effective approach alongside technical training and formal qualifications.
- Projects became better equipped to track how their habitat work was affecting wildlife, with new tools including bioacoustics, camera traps, dipwells and eDNA sampling introduced across several projects, with some of this information already feeding into Local Nature Recovery Strategies.

Partnership working was both a key enabler of delivery and a lasting outcome of the programme, with relationships established through SSF continuing well beyond the funded period:

- 55 organisations formally supported delivery across 14 partnerships by programme close, up from 50 at application, enabling projects to pool expertise, share resources and coordinate activity at a scale that would not have been achievable independently.

Staff described partnerships changing what organisations knew about each other and what they could deliver together, with several already planning future joint work and funding bids.

- Organisations also reported leaving the programme better placed to deliver at scale, citing stronger procurement systems, more in-house delivery capability and greater credibility with statutory bodies.

Connecting People with Nature

Projects delivered **1,762 events** and **engaged 51,443 people across England**, with 80% of events taking place in the second year of delivery as community relationships and trust matured. School and youth organisation activity was the single largest type of engagement, accounting for 29% of events.

Projects also created **over 6,250 metres of new footpath**, of which nearly half is accessible, alongside hides, boardwalks and interpretation boards, helping more people physically reach and use sites.

Projects were most successful at reaching new audiences where they worked through trusted intermediaries rather than open invitation, including:

- Schools and youth organisations.
- Mental health and wellbeing organisations.
- Refugee and asylum-seeker groups.
- Accessibility and disability organisations.
- Carers groups and people experiencing social isolation.

Reflecting on their own delivery, project staff identified repeated engagement and a practical role for participants as the clearest driver of impact, including increased confidence, practical skills, social connections and a growing sense of ownership over local sites. Sustained engagement through SSF also acted as a catalyst for longer-term stewardship, with volunteers and community groups continuing to take on more responsibility for sites beyond the funded period.

Value for Money

The value for money assessment indicates that **SSF delivered good value for money**, with particularly strong performance in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. Total project delivery cost amounted to £28.3 million, with projects securing match funding from a range of sources including substantial in-kind contributions.

Across the 17 projects that provided sufficient data, key unit costs were:

- £2,686 per hectare of habitat activity across 3,822 hectares.
- £2,774 per event across 1,308 events.
- £49,383 per FTE job supported.

For most projects, the activity delivered would not have been achievable at the same scale without SSF funding, with the majority of outcomes assessed as genuinely additional to what organisations could have delivered independently. The breadth of

outcomes delivered across habitat action, workforce development and community engagement, alongside wider co-benefits such as flood risk reduction, supports the overall positive assessment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

SSF has made a considerable contribution to nature recovery across England, **delivering 4,800 hectares of habitat action**, demonstrating that a two-year, partnership-based programme can achieve meaningful habitat restoration and nature connection at scale.

The programme has left a legacy for habitat, monitoring evidence, partnerships and community stewardship.

Based on the findings of this evaluation, the following recommendations are made for future nature recovery or similar programmes:

1. **Longer timescales:** Delays to statutory consents, landowner agreements and recruitment, alongside the impact of adverse weather, were common causes of compressed delivery across SSF projects. Future environmental initiatives should extend delivery timeframes to a minimum of three years and include a clearly defined planning phase before delivery begins. This is particularly important for projects that are ambitious or delivered at landscape scale. More time at the beginning of programmes would allow grantees to secure permissions, complete baseline surveys, establish procurement arrangements and build landowner and community relationships before delivery begins. Future programme design should also take into account the ecological constraints of habitat delivery, recognising that many activities are seasonally dependent and that delays early in a programme can have a disproportionate impact on what can be achieved within the remaining delivery period.
2. **Funder flexibility:** Where longer delivery periods are not possible, funders could provide flexibility to allow projects to adapt in response to changing circumstances. The Heritage Fund's approach within SSF, including its willingness to support reasonable variations and change requests, was identified by grantees as essential to achieving outputs within the programme timeframe.
3. **Baseline monitoring:** The integration of species and habitat monitoring within project delivery was perceived to be one of the most significant capacity-building outcomes of SSF, enabling grantees to establish baselines, measure progress and strengthen the evidence base for future management and funding. Future initiatives should require applicants to include a monitoring and baseline plan within their project design, with allocated funding to support this activity from the outset. This will help to ensure that evidence collected during delivery is consistent, robust and usable for both site management and programme-level evaluation.
4. **Alignment to statutory targets:** Definitions relating to statutory habitat targets were published after SSF project awards were made, meaning that neither fund design nor project planning could fully account for what activity would ultimately count towards the target. During delivery, additional clarification on thresholds

and eligibility was provided after year one (see [Annex A](#)). Where possible, future programmes should ensure early alignment with published definitions and evidence requirements before the fund design and award stage and maintain these consistently throughout delivery.

5. **Green finance readiness:** Where future programmes identify green finance as an intended outcome, statutory bodies and funders should provide clear guidance and set realistic expectations with grantees from the outset about what is required to pursue green finance routes and what is achievable within the programme timeframe. Projects should also be encouraged to build monitoring and baseline data collection into their plans from the start, recognising that a strong early evidence base is a prerequisite for developing credible investment cases.
6. **Partnership working:** Partnership working was consistently identified as a key enabler of effective delivery across SSF, supporting organisations to achieve outcomes that would not have been possible independently. The relationships, shared knowledge and collaborative ways of working established through SSF have in many cases continued beyond the funded period, with several partnerships already planning future joint work and funding bids. Future programmes should actively encourage and support partnership development from the outset, recognising that the relationships built through collaborative delivery represent a meaningful and lasting legacy for nature recovery.
7. **Cross-programme learning:** Future similar programmes should include structured opportunities for cross-programme learning during delivery, enabling grantees to share approaches, respond to common challenges and understand their contribution to a wider national nature recovery effort.

1 Introduction

The Species Survival Fund (SSF) was 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 was delivered in England with input from the Environment Agency and Natural England.

The SSF sought 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 UK Government to improve species abundance by at least 10% relative to 2030 by 2042. The 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 was 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 were 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 could 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.

The 20 SSF projects and lead delivery organisations:

- Biodiversity Boost: A Journey to a Wilder Druridge, Northumberland Wildlife Trust Ltd
- Bogs and Bittern: Somerset Wetland Restoration, Somerset Wildlife Trust
- Species Coastal and Wetlands: More, Better, Bigger, Joined, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- Coastal Grasslands Reconnected, Durham County Council (on behalf of Durham Heritage Coast Partnership)
- Freshwater Renaissance, The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty
- Making Space for Nature in Dorset, Dorset Wildlife Trust
- Mid-Cornwall Moors Recovery, Cornwall Wildlife Trust
- Nature Rich Miterdale, University Of Leeds
- Newcastle's Nature Networks, Newcastle City Council
- Northwest and Southwest Rainforest Restoration, The Woodland Trust
- Partnerships for Nature in the North Wessex Downs, Wiltshire Council (on behalf on North Wessex Downs National Landscape)
- Re:New Nature in the New Forest, New Forest National Park Authority
- Restoration of lost habitats for a Wild Peak, Derbyshire Wildlife Trust
- Ribble Revival: Room for Rivers, Ribble Rivers Trust
- Species & Habitat Recovery in the Medlock Valley, Groundwork Greater Manchester
- Species Stacking the Shire Brook Valley, Sheffield City Council
- Species Survival in Hertfordshire's Chalk Rivers, Hertfordshire & Middlesex Wildlife Trust
- Thriving in a Wilder Trent, Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust
- Wet Willow Wildlife, Lancashire Wildlife Trust
- Wetter for Waders: Enhancing Somerset's Coastal Wetlands, WWT – The Wetland Charity

SSF project delivery commenced in April 2024 and was completed by February 2026.

1.1 Project Geography

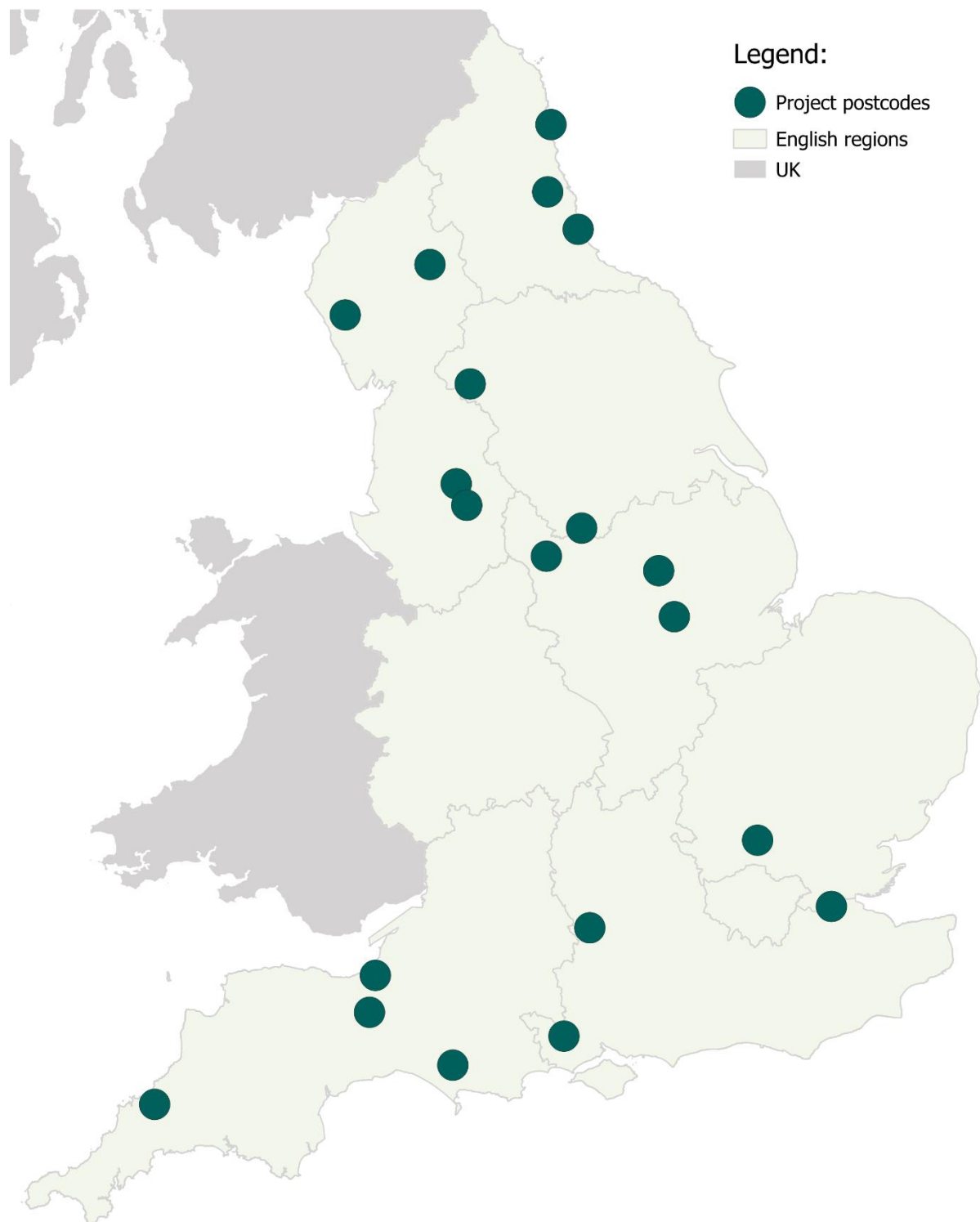
The SSF funded projects across the country, with projects located in all English regions except for the West Midlands and Greater London.

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 were clusters of projects across England. Six projects were located within proximity of Manchester, Sheffield,

and Nottingham, whilst three projects were delivering activity near the North East coast. Five projects were located in the area close to Bristol and Southampton.

Figure 1.1: Project location by delivery organisation postcode

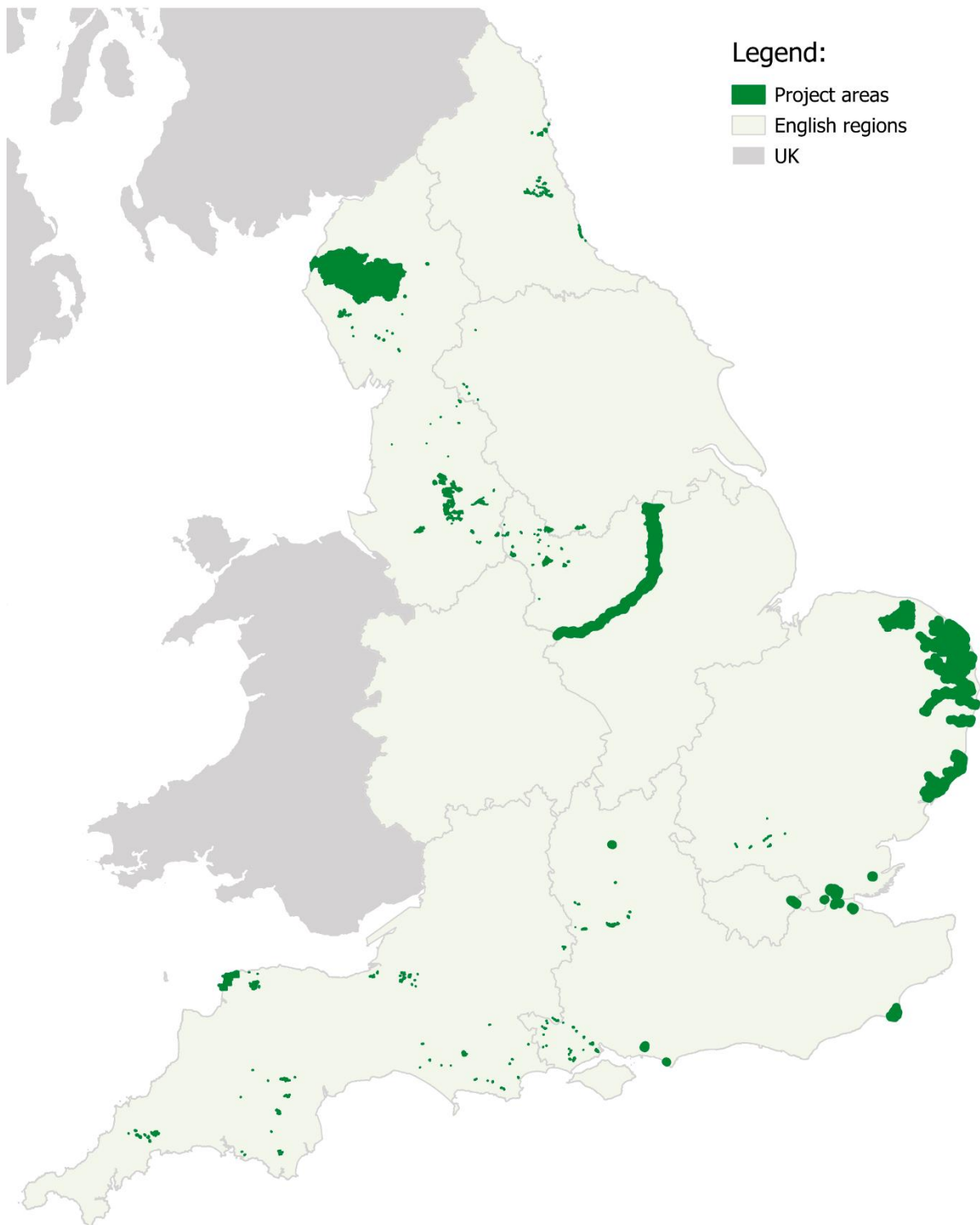


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The geographic distribution of projects can also be represented spatially using project area. This spatial data was submitted by projects at the time of application and should be interpreted within the context of the type of habitat in which action is taking place.

For example, some projects were delivering landscape-scale restoration activity, some were seeking to improve habitat connectivity over multiple sites, and others were carrying out activities across riparian habitats on either a river or catchment scale. These activities all present differently on the map below (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2: Project location by project areas



Base: Monitoring information. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2026.

2 Methodology

A range of research activity was delivered between October 2025-May 2026:

- A final interview with the project manager for each of the 20 SSF projects.
- Site visits to all 20 projects (October 2025-January 2026) This was the second of two site visits, informing longitudinal case studies on each project.
- 14 workshops which included 91 project staff across all 20 projects (November 2025-January 2026).
- Analysis of self-reported project monitoring data submitted in January 2026 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 from 647 sites. The 20 projects submitted spatial data for 2,250 actions. This data was used to assess impact of SSF on habitats and contribute to statutory habitat target reporting.
- The approach to assessing potential contribution towards the statutory habitat targets involved 6 key steps: Data Standards; Data Validation; Data Cleaning; Data Triangulation; Confidence Assessment; Data Analysis

Findings in this report draw on the full range of evidence sources above and are not restated by source at each point. Where a finding comes from a single named source, such as a specific project's own evaluation, this is referenced directly.

It is worth noting that qualitative findings from interviews, workshops and project-level evaluations reflect what grantees and staff reported about their own delivery and impact, whilst the ecological assessment of spatial data provides an independent, externally assessed judgement on the likely contribution of habitat action to the statutory wildlife-rich habitat target.

Through close working between Wavehill, Environment Systems, the Heritage Fund, Defra and Natural England, additional clarification was developed on the thresholds required for project actions to qualify as habitat creation, restoration or management under the statutory habitat target definitions. Full details of these revised definitions and how they have been applied are provided in Annex A.

As one of the first programmes to report against these targets at scale, SSF played a significant role in developing and refining the practical application of the statutory habitat target definitions across a range of habitat types and delivery contexts.

3 Process Evaluation

In line with the specification for this evaluation and key areas of enquiry outlined in the programme Theory of Change, this process evaluation draws on evidence from across the full programme delivery period, with a focus on the final year of delivery.

3.1 Delivery progress and challenges

This section outlines the key factors that shaped delivery across the programme, including the challenges faced and how projects responded to them.

Most grantees reported that they met or exceeded their original targets by the end of SSF. For most, delivery was more concentrated in the final year than originally planned, largely because of delays in year one, with grantees often using the final months of delivery to complete delayed activity, bring forward alternative sites or make use of underspend. More detail on performance against targets can be found in [Section 4](#).

As highlighted in the [Interim Evaluation Report](#), environmental activity was frequently delayed in the first year by recruitment, landowner negotiations and the time required to secure statutory consents, including flood risk activity permits, felling licences, scheduled monument consent and archaeological permissions. These delays, in year one, were often compounded by the need to run permissions, procurement and delivery planning alongside each other, meaning that habitat-based activity became considerably more intensive in the final year than originally intended.

‘A lot of delivery has taken place in the final few months because of permits. I was hoping it would be more spread out.’ **Staff, Reflective Workshop**

Projects also identified the length of the delivery window as a key challenge, furthered in some cases by bureaucracy within local authority systems and complex partnership arrangements. For example, one project reported that delays in funding agreements and permissions with their respective local authority meant that delivery did not begin until September, compressing the time available for seasonal activity. Staff also noted that some planned access improvements, including an accessible bathroom, had to be removed from the project because the local authority procedures needed to approve and procure the work could not be completed within the SSF timeframe. As highlighted within the [Interim Evaluation Report](#), the delivery window was frequently cited as insufficient for large-scale environmental work, particularly where the first few months were taken up by legal agreements, recruitment, procurement and permissions.

Despite these challenges, the majority of grantees reported that once consents were in place, delivery often progressed quickly in year two, with teams working to narrow seasonal windows and managing multiple sites or contractors simultaneously.

Several grantees adapted plans, switched sites or made use of underspend to bring in alternative sites where permissions were already in place. For example, when Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust had to scale back activity at one site because of delays, the team redirected the remaining budget into activities at three smaller sites that were ready to proceed. Cornwall Wildlife Trust similarly replaced a site where the landowner had withdrawn with an alternative site that could still deliver the intended outcomes. Northumberland Wildlife Trust also redirected funds originally allocated for an osprey pole after identifying that ospreys would threaten an existing marsh harrier population at the same site, reallocating the budget to install barn owl and tawny owl nesting boxes across three reserves. In several cases, the ability to adapt in this way was instrumental in projects maintaining their overall outputs.

By the final year of SSF, project staff also reflected that they were much clearer about what could realistically be achieved and, as a result, were more willing to make changes to original plans. This included prioritising the most impactful activity, redirecting resource to sites that were ready for delivery or using underspend to bring forward activity that could still be delivered within the remaining time. Staff reflections suggest that this willingness to adapt plans was a key factor in most projects meeting or exceeding their original targets by project close.

‘By the final year, we were much clearer about what we could do, and what we had to let go of.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

Staff frequently reported that a key strength and enabler of their delivery was the use of existing local relationships. Where grantees had existing relationships with landowners, councils, contractors or community groups, these helped delivery progress more rapidly once it began. Long-standing relationships were particularly useful where grantees needed to maintain landowner confidence through periods of delay, identify replacement sites at short notice or keep activity moving across multiple sites.

Additionally, many grantees valued the Heritage Fund's role in administering SSF, particularly the ability to discuss changes, use underspends effectively, make variations and adapt delivery where site conditions, consents or landowner agreements changed.

‘[SSF being] Defra funding but Heritage Lottery managed has been really good [...] The claiming process with the Lottery has been more familiar with us, they're much faster allowing us to flex out delivery and make changes when needed. That was essential for a project that only lasted 2 years.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

SSF nature connection and community engagement activity typically followed a different trajectory to habitat delivery. In particular staff frequently reflected that this activity depended on the time required to build relationships with communities and the general public, with more substantive delivery becoming possible as those relationships matured. For example, Somerset Wildlife Trust described volunteer engagement growing steadily over time, from very small numbers at early events to fully booked sessions later in the project. However, these aspects of delivery were also susceptible to staff turnover. RSPB described a considerable loss of engagement capacity after a team member reduced their hours, illustrating how quickly momentum can be affected where key staff change during a short funding period. In practice, several grantees found themselves trying to grow community engagement at the same point that some staff were more likely to be seeking permanent employment near the end of their fixed-term contracts.

In the following sub-sections, delivery progress across the key thematic areas of benefits to nature, skills and capacity building, and connecting people with nature is explored in further detail.

3.2 Benefits to Nature

This section explores how project activity has progressed in the final year of delivery, including grantee perceptions of strengths, challenges and learning identified.

3.2.1 Habitat Creation, Restoration and Management

As highlighted in [Section 3.1](#), habitat delivery across the programme was often more concentrated in the final year than originally intended, reflecting earlier delays around consents, recruitment, partnership arrangements and landowner agreements. Overall, grantees reported that habitat creation, restoration and management activity progressed well overall, with most confirming that they had completed their planned works or adapted delivery successfully where original plans became impracticable. In many cases, the final year was a period of accelerated and focused delivery.

‘We’ve ramped up a lot. This year has been a lot quicker [than last year] and there’s been a lot more happening. So our delivery staff didn’t hit the ground until September and that first winter was about understanding the area, understanding the lay of the land in terms of who were the contractors, building relationships with those contractors, building relationships and refining relationships with the partnership [...] because there have been a lot of staff changes in [Partner Organisation] [...]. Because [the site] is quite remote, we found it quite challenging to find people to [build] fencing but once we developed those relationships, we’ve had a much busier time.’

Staff, Final Interview

Grantees delivered a wide range of habitat works under this theme, including wetland and river restoration, scrub removal, invasive species control, grassland management, woodland works, hydrological interventions and pond creation. Staff suggested that these activities were typically combinations of capital works, habitat management and, where possible, baseline surveys or monitoring so that delivery could contribute to longer-term management after the grant period ended.

Grantee ability to adapt project delivery throughout SSF was highlighted as a key strength afforded to them by the Heritage Fund's approach to programme management. Staff indicated that where original sites or methods became impractical, grantees changed sequencing, sites or redirected budgets to keep delivery on track. In some cases, replacing planned activity with alternative sites was instrumental in maintaining overall outputs. In other cases, revising the design of works in response to site conditions or the performance of natural processes allowed grantees to improve on original plans rather than replicate them. Further detail on this is provided in [Section 4.1](#).

Final staff interviews and project-level evaluations from Durham County Council and Somerset Wildlife Trust also indicate that baseline monitoring was an important aspect of benefits to nature delivery. In some cases, grantees established habitat or condition baselines that had not previously existed for those sites, giving them a clearer starting point for future monitoring and management. This was particularly valuable where grantees were working on sites that lacked consistent condition evidence before SSF delivery began. For future programmes, ensuring that baseline monitoring activity is resourced and planned from the outset will be important where the aim is to support long-term nature recovery.

As highlighted in [Section 3.1](#), seasonality directly influenced what grantees could deliver, when works could take place, how contractors were engaged and how much flexibility projects retained once earlier delays had occurred. Activity such as hedge laying and tree thinning was restricted to narrow winter windows to avoid nesting seasons, and where consents, procurement or landowner agreements had delayed activity earlier in the programme, grantees had limited opportunity to reschedule within the remaining time. However, it is important to acknowledge that organisations delivering habitat works are experienced in managing seasonal constraints as part of environmental delivery, and final interviews and workshops indicate that most grantees were able to complete their planned works, adapting sequencing and approach where needed.

‘It’s been going well. There have been busy periods and less busy periods. [It is] interesting to see where the peaks and troughs are and where the bottlenecks are. Because of the seasonal nature there is always a rush to get things done. It’s been fraught in those moments where there has been a rush to get things done. Over the summer it has been a bit quieter, and we focused more on engagement work. We’ve done everything we wanted to do, just maybe not in the way we thought.’ **Staff, Workshop**

Additionally, favourable weather in the final year helped many projects ‘catch up’ on activity that had been delayed earlier in their delivery. As a result, most grantees felt they had successfully delivered against their targets. This is a positive finding, though it is worth noting that this outcome was in part weather-dependent. Given increasingly unpredictable weather patterns linked to climate change, future programmes cannot necessarily rely on favourable conditions in the final year to counteract earlier delays. Future programmes should therefore consider how to build greater resilience into delivery, whether through longer timeframes, which grantee organisations would welcome, or by aligning project start dates with ecological seasons where feasible, rather than by financial year cycles.

Project-level evaluation evidence suggests that site access and logistics were a recurring delivery issue across several projects, including Dorset Wildlife Trust, WWT, Newcastle City Council, Wiltshire Council and Lancashire Wildlife Trust. These challenges were most evident where works depended on heavy machinery, specialist contractors or access to sites with restricted entry or poor ground conditions. In practice, this affected when contractors could operate, limited the type or scale of equipment that could be used, and reduced flexibility once delivery windows narrowed. This was reiterated by staff who described access constraints, contractor mobilisation and changing ground conditions as factors that required re-sequencing works and, in some cases, reducing the scope of elements of the original design.

3.2.2 Small actions

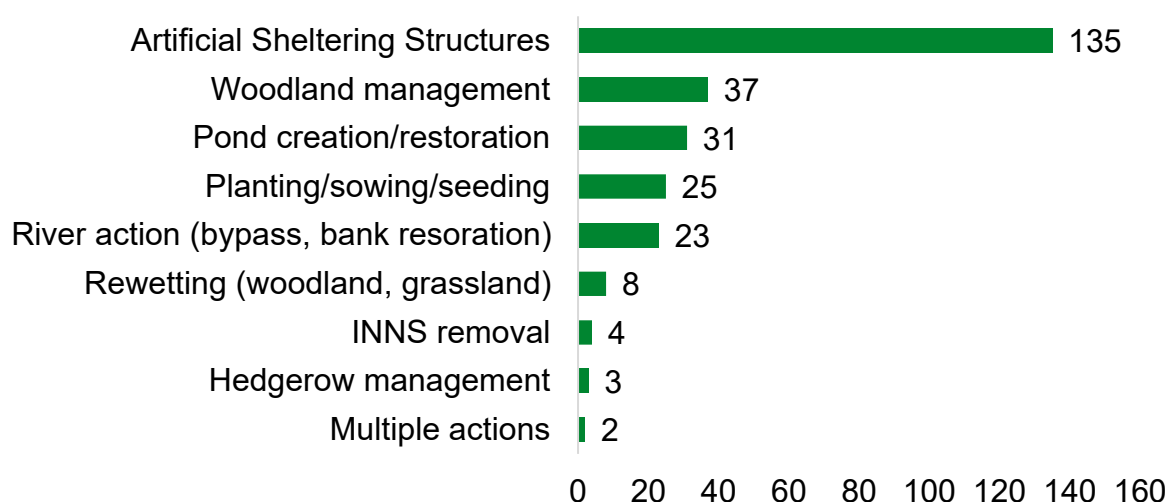
Whilst the majority of the benefits to nature are captured through the spatial data, any actions that covered an area smaller than the minimum mapping unit (25 m²) were provided in the monitoring data.

Throughout the lifetime of the programme (2024-2026), 15 projects undertook small-scale habitat actions, which have played a complementary role in habitat management. Monitoring data includes 268 small scale action records, comprising 2,303 actions. Notably, 52% of these records have involved the creation or restoration of wildlife-rich habitat.

As shown in Figure 3.1 below, a wide range of actions were implemented, including supporting habitat creation through the installation of artificial structures (e.g., owl boxes, hibernacula) or pond restoration. Additionally, habitat management or

restoration activities on a small scale included selective woodland management such as tree veteranisation or targeted invasive non-native species (INNS) removal.

Figure 3.1: Small scale action records by type



Base: Monitoring information (n=2,303).

Grantees reported that small-scale actions were often more adaptable than larger capital works. Grantees could adjust locations, timing or scale more readily, and in several cases used these actions to maintain progress whilst awaiting permissions, access or contractor input on more substantial works. Staff reported that these actions were most valued where they contributed directly to habitat aims or provided clear opportunities for volunteers or partner groups to participate in delivery.

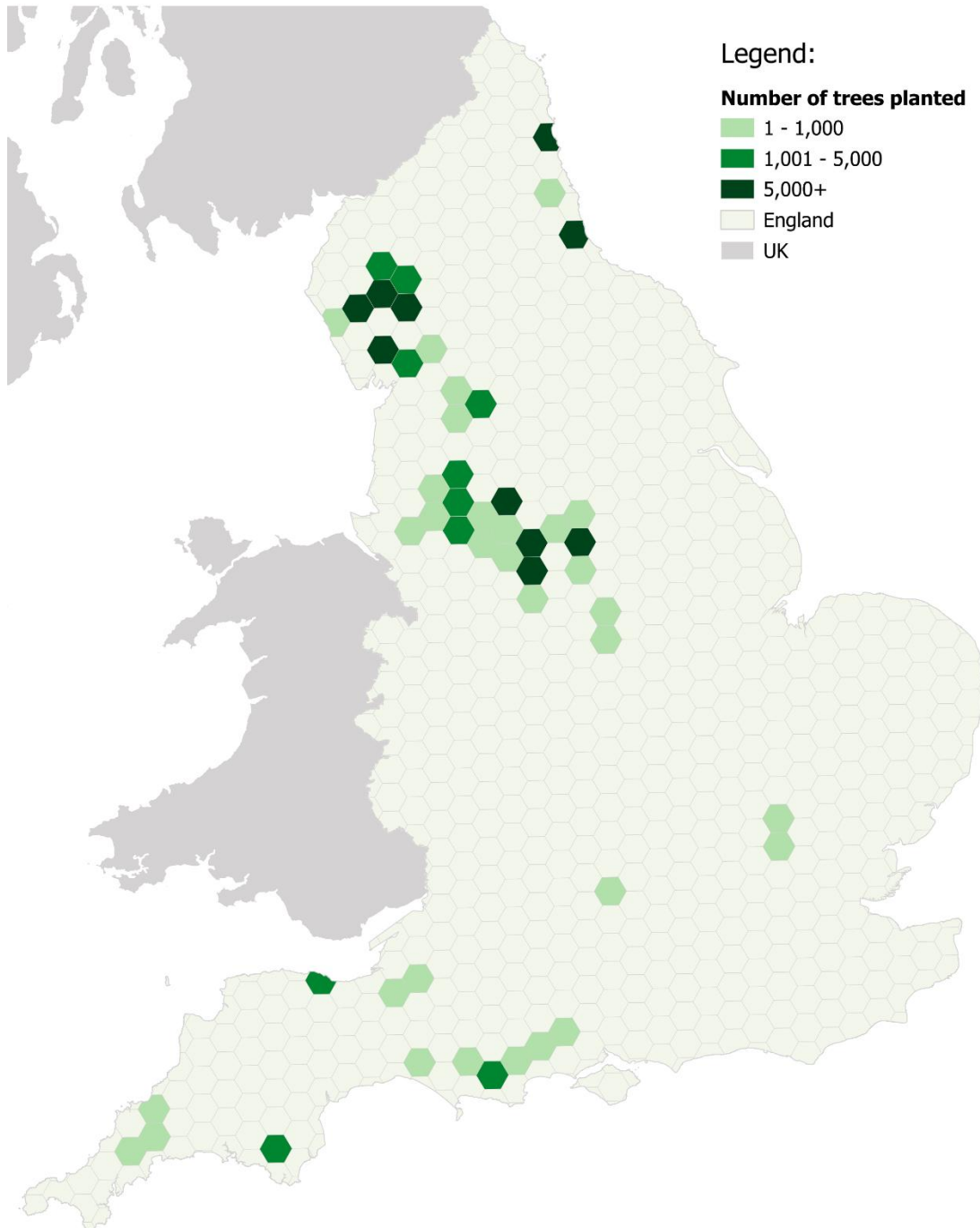
For volunteers, they love doing the practical work, especially removing scrub to improve the quality of a heath and a chalk downland.' **Staff, Workshop**

However, small-scale actions were typically subject to the same environmental and practical constraints as wider habitat delivery, including seasonal restrictions and weather-related disruption.

3.2.3 Tree planting

Grantees 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 18 projects, a total of 124,062 broadleaf and 3,480 coniferous trees were planted within SSF (2024-2026). This has 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.

Figure 3.2: Map of trees planted



Base: Monitoring information (n=265 records). Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2026.

A small sample of grantees confirmed that tree planting was an important component of their habitat delivery, contributing to woodland creation, riparian corridors and habitat connectivity. When reflecting on tree planting, staff frequently stated that tree planting activity was integrated into wider habitat activity packages rather than treated as a standalone output, with the aim of strengthening habitat function and contributing to longer-term site management.

Staff also reported that tree planting provided a flexible and visible form of habitat delivery that could, in some cases, be scheduled around other works and adapted in terms of location or scale. Where grantees had established relationships with landowners and contractors, planting activity could often be brought forward or adjusted in response to delays elsewhere in project delivery. In several projects, planting days also provided effective opportunities for volunteer involvement, contributing to both habitat aims and nature connection objectives.

‘People love tree planting. Historically as [an organisation] we have had very little land to do tree planting but those events [within SSF have] often been fully subscribed.’ **Staff, Workshop**

However, tree planting was also subject to the same seasonal constraints as other habitat-based activity, with poor ground conditions and extreme weather particularly constraining delivery in some cases. As planting windows are restricted to the dormant season, delays earlier in the programme could considerably reduce the available time for this activity. Project-level evaluation evidence suggests that where planting formed a substantive part of a project's aims, the compressed delivery window created pressure on teams to complete activity within a narrow period.

3.2.4 Habitat Connectivity

As highlighted in [Section 3.1](#), many grantees refined their original delivery plans as projects progressed, and habitat connectivity was particularly affected by this. Projects often moved from broad ambitions around linking habitats to practical decisions about where joined-up action was feasible within the time, access and landowner arrangements available. Within this, however, feedback indicates that SSF supported meaningful habitat connectivity across a range of approaches and scales.

Grantees approached habitat connectivity in various ways. In some cases, projects physically created or restored habitat links through river corridor work, fish and eel passes, hedgerows, woodland connections or wetland creation. Other projects improved habitat quality across several strategically located sites, with the expectation that this would support species movement and ecological function over time. Several staff also described building connectivity through smaller stepping-stone habitats across landscapes, rather than continuous corridors.

‘We have been able to not only create and restore large spaces for nature, but also small stepping stones across the landscape which play a crucial part in a nature recovery network, improving the ability of species to move through [the region].’ **Staff, Workshop**

River and wetland projects provided good examples of physical connectivity. For example, as detailed in their project-level evaluation, Groundwork Greater Manchester described river restoration from Lees Brook downstream as improving connectivity for fish and other migrating species, with habitat improvements at Clayton Vale and further upstream strengthening habitat quality between sites. Other project staff similarly described eel passes as helping to join up spaces for nature, and weir removal as opening up upstream passage for salmon, eels and white-clawed crayfish.

Several grantees also described connectivity within larger sites, where different habitat types were brought together into a more coherent habitat mosaic. In one project, watercourse rewiggling, reedbed creation, wet woodland, hedgerow planting and tree planting collectively improved habitat links across the site:

‘Rewiggling and reedbed activity [has meant] we have improved a really long stretch of habitat. Wet woodland [has been] created, which really connects up a large area. Hedge and tree planting [have created] stepping stones across [the wider area]. Connections and removing barriers to wildlife moving have been huge.’ **Staff, Workshop**

Some grantees also used species evidence to target connectivity works. For example, Lancashire Wildlife Trust described how Citizen Science records of Willow Tit were used to identify where habitat works would best support the species, rather than targeting works based on general habitat suitability alone.

Grantees also reported that the programme supported landscape-scale thinking in a way that shorter or more fragmented funding has not, most commonly describing this in contrast to shorter one-year funding rounds, programmes with a more prescriptive delivery focus, or funders who offered less flexibility. The flexibility provided by the Heritage Fund was seen as particularly important in enabling this approach within a two-year window, though as noted in [Section 3.1](#), grantees also reflected that a longer delivery period would have further supported landscape-scale working by reducing the pressure created by factors outside of their control. In some cases this brought together neighbouring landowners for the first time, with conservation practices beginning to align across holdings in ways that individual sites could not achieve alone.

‘[Landowners] are starting to align all of their conservation practices so that they’re all singing from the same hymn sheet. When you look at the species that we’re trying to positively affect, which are very mobile and can move around a landscape with ease, I think we’re doing quite a lot to fill in those gaps, which is nice.’ **Staff, Workshop**

Joined-up habitat action frequently depended on factors that proved difficult to control in practice, including landowner willingness, site access, ground conditions, permissions and the need to align works across different sites. These constraints were particularly evident where connectivity ambitions relied on several landowners or on sequencing activity across multiple sites within a short timeframe. As a result, some grantees became more selective as delivery progressed. Project-level evaluations from Newcastle City Council and Wiltshire Council suggest that plans to coordinate works across a wider set of sites had to be reduced once access, permissions or ground conditions limited what could be delivered within the available window.

3.3 Skills and Capacity Building

This section explores how skills and capacity building project activity has progressed in the final year of delivery, including grantee perceptions of strengths, challenges and learning identified.

3.3.1 Jobs, Apprenticeships and Traineeships

Project monitoring data indicates that SSF has supported a total of 197 jobs (135.7 Full-Time Equivalent, FTE) throughout its lifetime. Just under half of all jobs supported through SSF were full-time roles (49% or 95 roles). Of the 197 supported jobs, the majority were newly created (102 roles or 52%) with over just under half involving the retention of existing staff (90 jobs or 46%). In addition, projects claimed a total of £1,506,540 through full cost recovery (FCR) throughout the programme.

Table 3.1 Employment supported through the programme.

Employment type	Total job roles	% job roles	Total FTE	% FTE
Newly created	102	52%	92.2	68%
Existing staff retained	95	48%	44.5	32%
Total	197	100%	135.7	100%

Base: Monitoring information (n=197). Please note that the roles covered by FCR (3% of jobs) has been included within ‘existing staff retained’.

Just over four-fifths of jobs were hosted by lead partner organisations (81% or 159 roles), whilst the remaining fifth were hosted by partner organisations (19% or 38 roles). In terms of FTE, 87% of staff time was hosted by lead partners (117.5 FTE). This varied across projects, with:

- Three projects balanced staff time across partners (i.e. less than 60% of staff time hosted by the lead partner)
- Six projects with between 60-80% staff time hosted by the lead partner
- Eleven projects with over 80% of staff time within the lead partner, of which nine were 100% lead partner time.

This is notable, since the project survey suggested that 14 projects were working in formal partnership with another organisation (see [Section 3.3.4](#) below), yet only 11 projects have paid staff across more than one organisation.

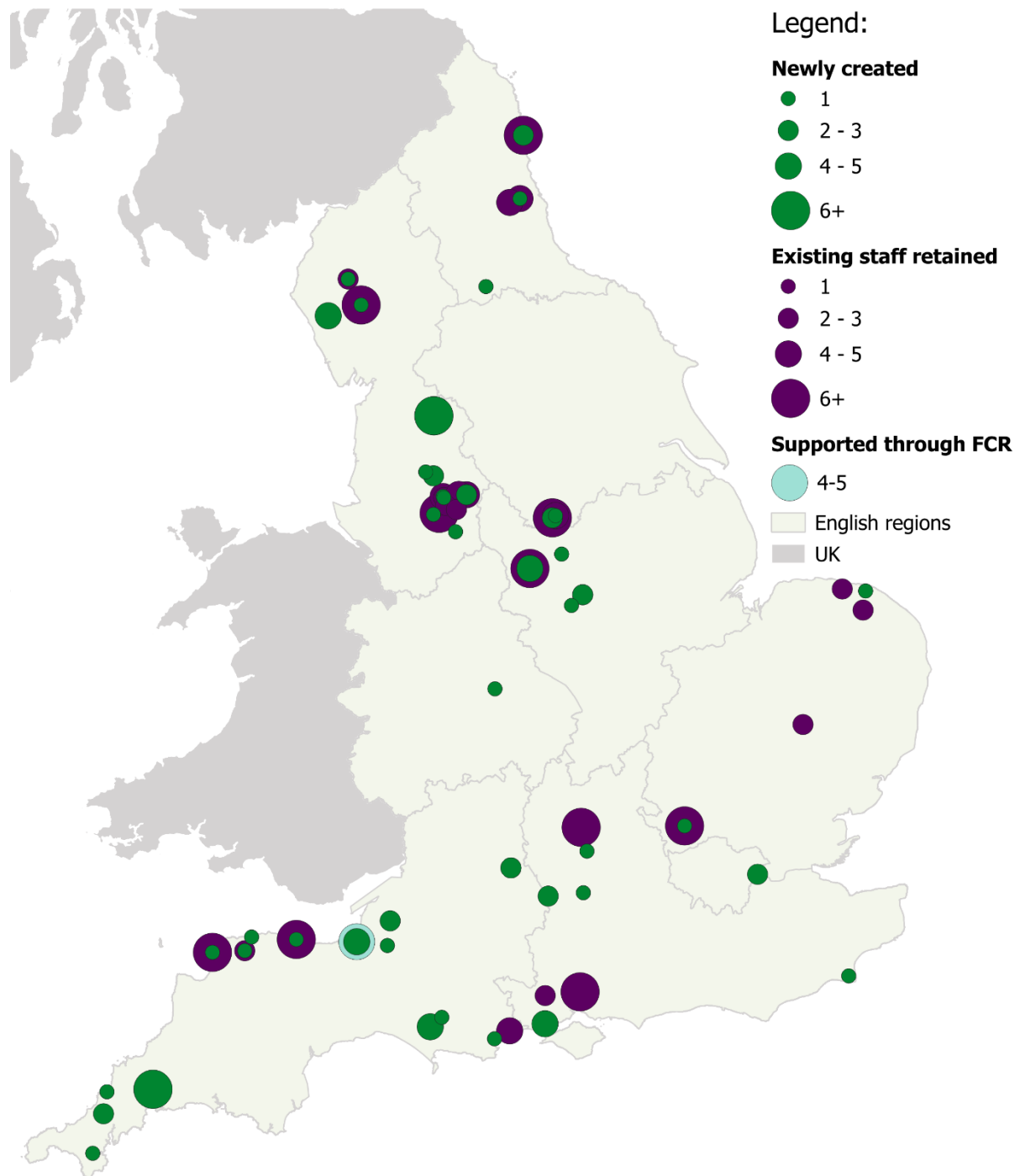
Table 3.2 below and Figure 3.3 below demonstrate the distribution of the employment supported through SSF. The regional breakdown of jobs supported reflects the geographical locations of projects and sites, suggesting that over a quarter (28% or 55 roles) of roles were located in the North West, with only one role in the West Midlands.

Table 3.2: Employment supported by region

Region	Total FTE	Newly created	Existing staff retained	Supported through FCR	Total roles	% of roles
North West	37.8	27	28	0	55	28%
South West	37.6	32	15	5	52	26%
South East	8.8	9	12	0	21	11%
East Midlands	17.7	10	9	0	19	10%
North East	12.9	8	10	0	18	9%
East of England	8.4	5	11	0	16	8%
Yorkshire and The Humber	4.9	3	5	0	8	4%
West Midlands	1	1	0	0	1	0.9%
Remote	5.6	6	0	0	6	3%
Unknown	1	1	0	0	1	0.9%
Total	135.7	102	90	5	197	100%

Base: Monitoring Information (n=197 roles).

Figure 3.3: Roles supported mapped

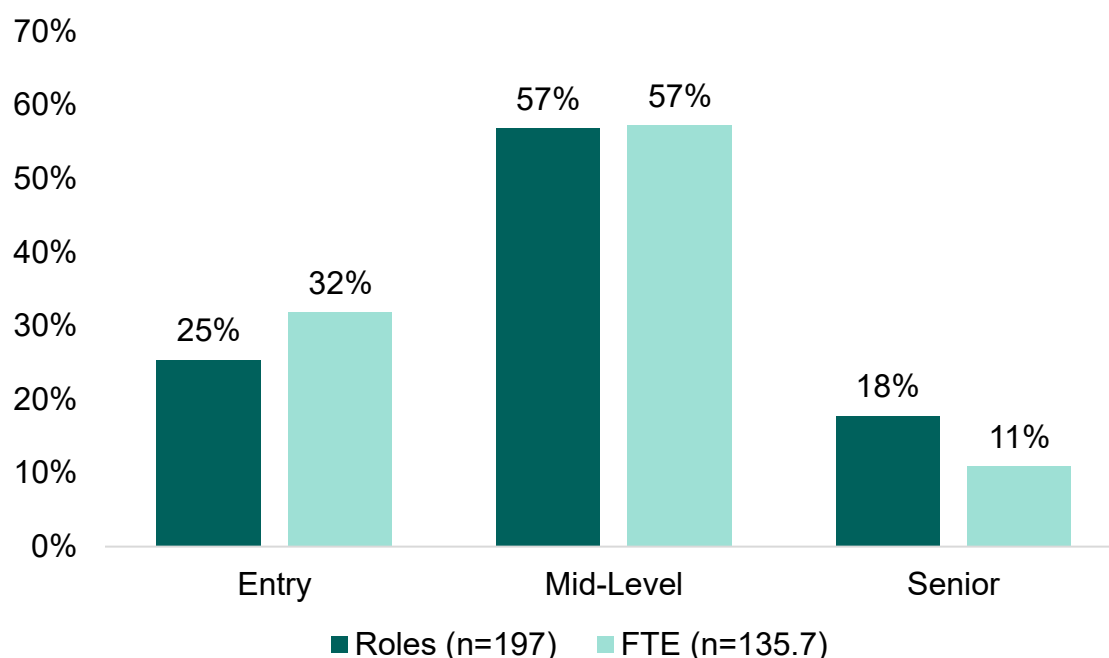


Base: Monitoring information (n=186). Please note that location data for 11 roles was unavailable. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2026.

SSF supported jobs across different levels of seniority; over half of job roles were mid-level (112 roles or 77.7 FTE) and a quarter were entry level (50 roles or 43.2 FTE). Senior-level roles were supported by the projects, but with lower FTE compared with entry-level roles, which were more likely to be full-time posts. This

spread of roles suggests that SSF supported a balanced workforce profile, contributing both to skills development through entry-level opportunities and to organisational capacity through mid-level roles.

Figure 3.4: Role level by job and FTE



Base: Monitoring Information (n=197).

Of the newly created job roles, 19 were traineeships and 8 were apprenticeships, with one apprenticeship noted to be an existing job role retained. Across the two years of project delivery, 144 jobs (108.6 FTE) were supported by SSF in year one and a further 53 jobs (27.1 FTE) in year two.

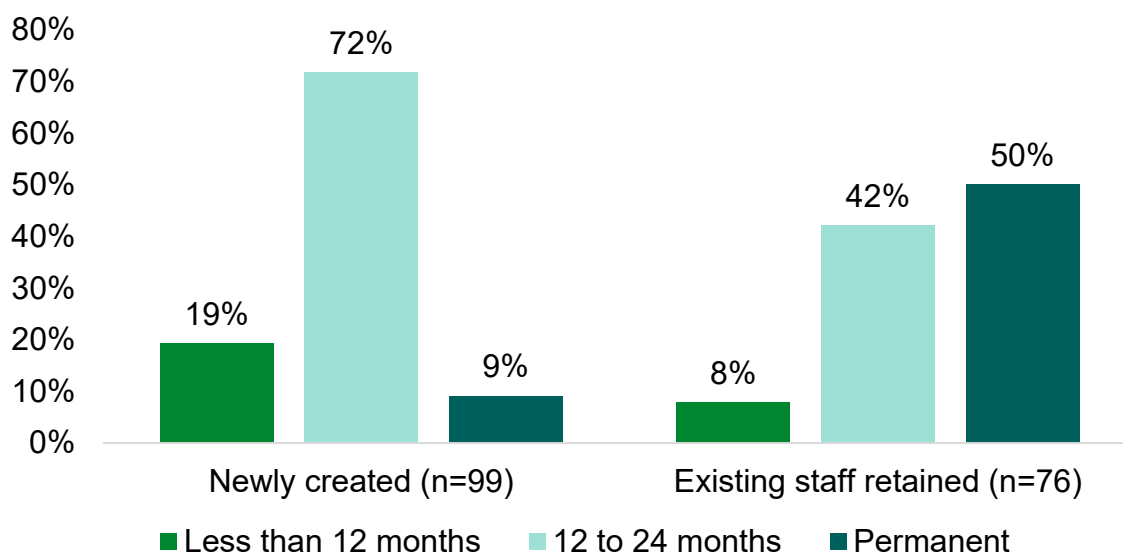
More detailed recruitment data was requested in year two, allowing a distinction to be made between anticipated and unanticipated recruitment, where unanticipated recruitment is understood as a reflection of staff turnover. It is important to note that a similar pattern likely existed in year one, though this distinction was not captured in the year one monitoring data. Within the data provided in the second year, almost half of jobs reported (47% or 24 roles) were unanticipated recruitment, whilst 27 (53%) jobs were planned¹. This equates to 10.5 FTE unanticipated (8% of total FTE) and included a range of job types from project managers, rangers, apprentices and administrative staff. This points to a total staff turnover across the programme of 12%, with 11 of the 20 projects reporting unanticipated recruitment in the second year of delivery.

The contract length for job roles created or retained are shown in Figure 3.5 below. This demonstrates that just under two-thirds of jobs supported were temporary contracts (65% or 128 roles) and just over a quarter of jobs were permanent

¹ Please note that these figures exclude information on retention provided for roles supported/created in year one of delivery. Information was missing for two roles.

contracts (52 or 26%). Within these permanent job roles, 43 were for existing staff and nine (8.1 FTE) were job roles created on a permanent contract. Further details on the destinations of jobs supported are explored in [Section 4.3.1](#).

Figure 3.5: Contract length for roles created or retained



Base: Monitoring Information. Please note that this graph excludes jobs supported through FCR (5 roles) and where job contract length was missing (17 roles). Please note that this figure includes apprentices and trainees.

Equalities data offers useful insight on the job roles supported, with demographic data available for 64% of roles (126 out of 197), slightly higher than 62% at interim stage. Figure 3.6 shows that the project had notable success in engaging younger staff, with 19% of supported roles (24/126) filled by individuals aged 25 or under. This compares favourably with the wider labour market, where 16-24 year olds account for just 11% of all people in employment in England in 2025.²

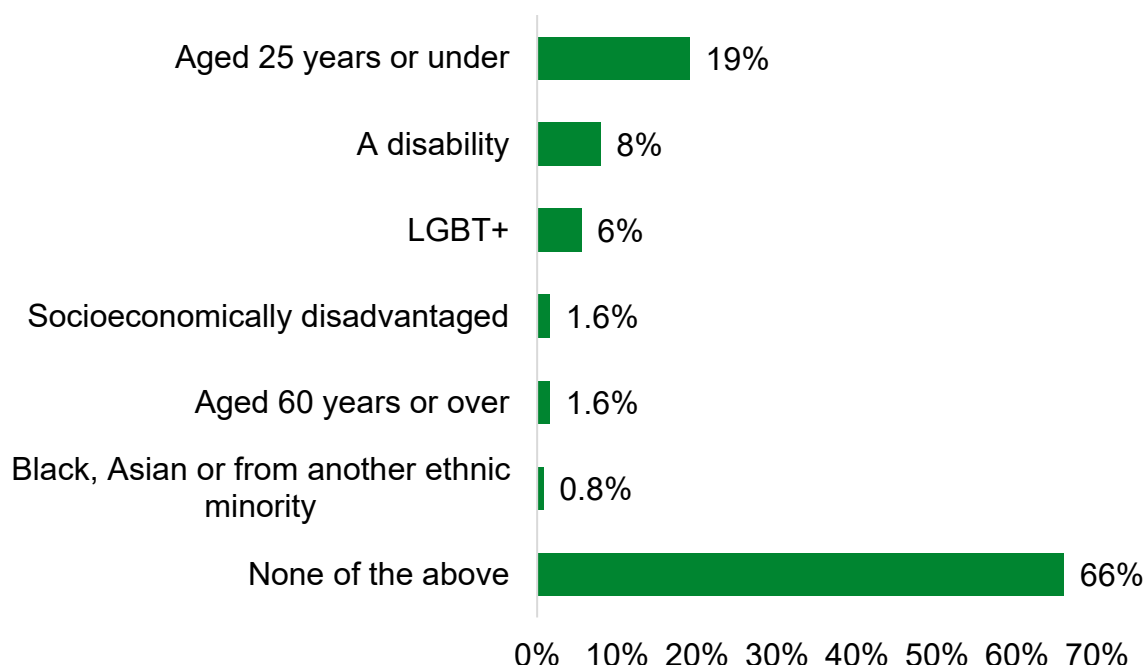
However, other communities also remained underrepresented when compared with England's employment figures. Disabled people accounted for 8% (10/126) of supported roles, notably below the 19% share that reflects wider employment figures for disabled people (disabled under the Equality Act 2010 and/or have a work-limiting disability³). Individuals from Black, Asian, or global majority backgrounds filled just 1% of roles, while making up 20% of all people in employment across England in 2025. Those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds similarly accounted for just 1.6% of roles (2/126). These figures resonate with wider evidence on diversity across the sector. The annual [Race Report](#) (2025) consistently highlights the underrepresentation of disabled people, people from Black, Asian and global majority backgrounds and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities within the environmental workforce. However, it is important to note that SSF was not designed with workforce diversification as a primary aim, and

² Annual Population Survey (2025)

³ Annual Population Survey (2025)

meaningful progress on this requires dedicated schemes, resources and sustained organisational effort over time. The findings here reinforce the case for targeted, dedicated investment in this area across the sector.

Figure 3.6: Equalities data



Base: Monitoring information & Equalities survey (n=126). Please note that percentages do not add up to 100% as individuals can belong to more than one demographic group.

Projects indicated that the roles supported through SSF were central to delivery capacity, particularly in the context of compressed timelines and complex habitat works. Staff reflected that SSF-funded roles enabled projects to manage multiple sites, contractors and regulatory requirements simultaneously, which would not have been possible using existing organisational capacity alone.

The fixed-term nature of contracts shaped both delivery and the extent to which organisations were able to retain the staff, skills and knowledge developed through SSF. Project-level evaluation evidence from Derbyshire Wildlife Trust and Newcastle City Council indicates that staff recruited on fixed-term contracts typically left before project completion to secure permanent roles elsewhere, resulting in reduced continuity, limited handover time and additional pressure on remaining staff, particularly during the final year when delivery intensity was highest.

‘People were moving on just as they’d really got up to speed.’ Staff, Final Interview

Projects valued the contribution apprentices and trainees made to delivery and saw these roles as important entry routes into the environmental sector. However, the limited funding duration constrained opportunities to offer progression within the same organisation. SSF therefore functioned more clearly as a route into the sector and a way to build practical skills than as a route to sustained job creation within individual organisations.

‘It’s a sector that’s difficult to access and it’s a sector that is traditionally one that there’s barriers to people accessing, particularly young people accessing. So, our apprenticeships have been our route into offering those opportunities to people.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

‘We had different apprentices throughout the project, a different apprentice every three or four months, which has actually been really great because we’ve had a lot of different skills that have come in and then a couple of apprentices that have really loved it and now want to be Rangers and others that found that they want to go down more the horticultural route.’ **Staff, Workshop**

‘We have taken on a small number of people on work experience and engaged more volunteers, helping them gain practical skills and experience in environmental work. Alongside this the team has signposted participants to wider green job opportunities, helping them understand possible pathways into the sector. Whilst there have not been many formal apprenticeships, the project has still contributed by building experience and awareness of green careers.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

Overall, the evaluation feedback indicates that SSF made a considerable contribution to short-term delivery capacity and workforce entry. Projects with clearer progression pathways or links to longer-term programmes were better placed to translate SSF-supported roles into longer-term capacity, whilst others experienced higher turnover as staff moved on once core delivery skills had been established.

3.3.2 Skill Development

All SSF projects provided training opportunities to staff and/or volunteers, with 537 training sessions attended by 3,049 people in total. These sessions were attended by 1,374 staff and 1,675 volunteers, through which 30% and 12% respectively gained qualifications (407 staff and 196 volunteers).

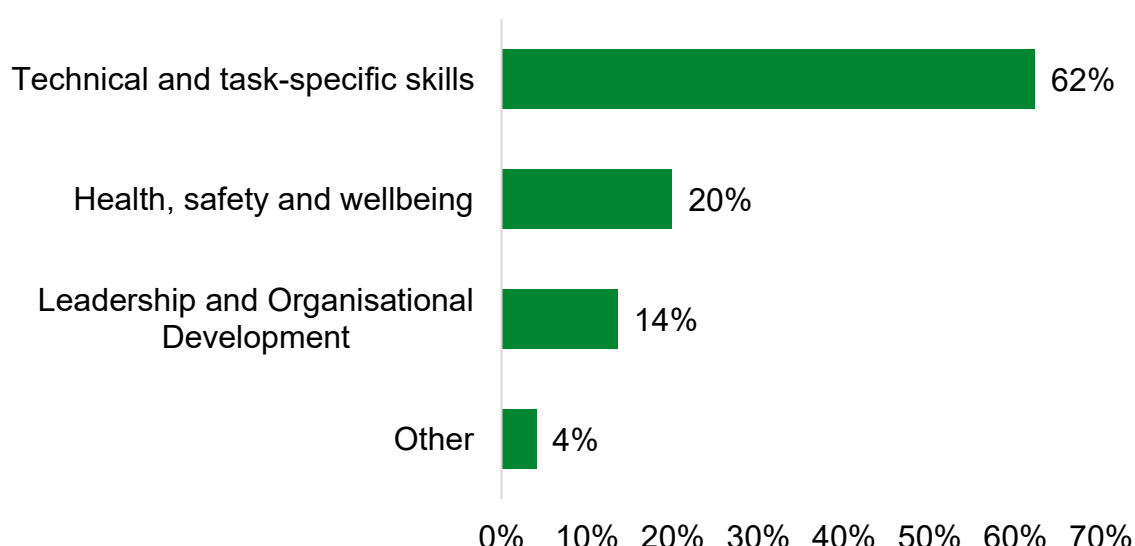
Table 3.3: Skill development opportunities for staff and volunteers

Role type	People taking part in training	People achieving qualification (if relevant) from training	% gaining qualification
Staff	1,374	407	30%
Volunteers	1,675	196	12%
Total	3,049	603	20%

Base: Monitoring information (n=537 records).

Training opportunities spanned a broad range of areas, including technical and task-specific skills, health, safety and wellbeing, and leadership and organisational development, as set out in Figure 3.7 below. Within these, grantees delivered formally accredited vocational qualifications, competence-based operational certificates and statutory compliance awards alongside non-accredited and informal learning.

Figure 3.7: Training opportunities by type



Base: Monitoring information (n=536). Please note, one training record has this information missing.

Training opportunity categories include a range of subject matters and certificate types, including:

- Formally accredited vocational qualifications from regulated bodies covering topics such as land management, habitat and species surveying or project management.
- Competence-based operational certificates confirming safe and competent use of specific equipment, machinery or techniques (e.g. chainsaws, plant, vehicles, pesticides)

- Statutory compliance and safety awards ensuring legal compliance and duty of care, including first aid, safeguarding, health and safety, data protection, and equality and inclusion.
- Non-accredited or informal training such as survey methods, species identification, volunteer management and stakeholder engagement.

Overall, the breadth of training delivered suggests that SSF investments supported both immediate delivery capability and longer-term workforce competence across staff and volunteers.

Skill development through SSF was wide-ranging and, in most projects, closely tied to the day-to-day demands of delivery. Projects varied in the extent to which they had identified skills needs before delivery began. Some had built training budgets into their plans from the outset, including machinery tickets, volunteer training, apprentice training and specialist ecological survey training. Others identified gaps as delivery progressed, particularly where staff moved into new roles, partners worked together for the first time, or projects expanded into new technical areas or communities. In several projects, knowledge that had previously been concentrated in a small number of people was widened across staff, contractors, volunteers and delivery partners through practical experience and peer learning.

‘[We wanted to] share techniques of habitat management, because knowledge was concentrated in particular areas of the organisation. The project helped us train other staff in habitat management and restoration techniques, [and] expand that knowledge with staff and other contractors, delivery bodies and volunteers. It [project training opportunities] also helped people understand what the wildlife needs, nature recovery networks, GIS skills, contract management and procurement.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

Some project staff described using structured reflection with staff to identify training needs, asking staff what development they would value and then using peer-to-peer learning and cross-project knowledge exchange to address gaps. Project-level evaluation evidence indicates that delivering technically demanding interventions, such as leaky dams, desilting and hydrological restoration, built internal expertise that staff expected to carry forward, strengthening organisational confidence in planning and implementing similar interventions in future.

‘In terms of the organisation, it's allowed us to deliver a lot of the work in-house, which we would have had to contract out [...] it's been a new way of working for us.’ **Staff, Workshop**

Cross-partner learning was also a notable feature of skills development across SSF. Several projects described partners training each other and sharing specialist skills

through joint delivery, including pond management, tree planting, drone operation, GIS, survey methods and species-specific techniques.

‘Everyone's had something, everyone's learnt something, everyone's trained on something. There's been a lot of cross partnership learning which has been really nice [...] it has connected the partners together in a stronger way. We all know what we can do.’ **Staff, Workshop**

For apprentices and trainees, half of all projects also described providing a broad package of training alongside site-based experience. In several cases, this translated into continued employment in the sector.

‘Our trainees are now in full time employment in conservation, one works for [the grantee organisation] and one now works in an ecology firm. We have a third trainee that has come into our full traineeship programme that we sourced through other funding.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

However, staff also suggested that opportunities for structured training and reflection were not consistent across all projects. Where delivery pressure increased, particularly in the final year, some projects prioritised completing physical works over formal training or accreditation, which limited development opportunities in some roles.

‘The pace and the speed of this project has impacted our ability [to provide training]. If we had more time and had it been less all hands on deck, with more time to think about this. Given the pace of it we delivered what we knew.’ **Staff, Workshop**

However, it is likely that staff and volunteers in these roles were still gaining valuable experiential learning through project delivery. For future programmes, asking projects to identify skills gaps and trainee development plans at the outset, whilst retaining flexibility to respond to needs that emerge during delivery, may help ensure that training remains a priority alongside project delivery.

3.3.3 Volunteering

All projects engaged with volunteers in some capacity, demonstrating that volunteers were a vital resource for project delivery. Monitoring information suggests that 13,097 volunteers contributed overall, of which 3,891 (30%) were first-time

volunteers for the delivery organisation. These volunteers were engaged across England, as set out in Table 3.4 below.

Table 3.4 Volunteers engaged by region

Region	Number of volunteers	Number of first time volunteers	% first time volunteers
North West	4,803	1,905	40%
South West	2,467	468	19%
South East	1,348	288	21%
East of England	1,221	169	14%
East Midlands	1,198	184	15%
North East	1,048	549	52%
Yorkshire and The Humber	996	323	32%
London	16	5	31%
Total	13,097	3,891	30%

Base: Monitoring information (n=842 records).

The role of volunteers in building monitoring and survey capacity across SSF was a reoccurring theme in final interviews and workshops. Several projects trained volunteers in species identification, Riverfly monitoring, water vole monitoring, Willow Tit surveys, butterfly monitoring and vegetation surveys, and in some projects, volunteers were able to conduct surveys without staff supervision as a result. However, as delivery pressures intensified in the final year, staff increasingly took on monitoring responsibilities themselves to ensure consistency and quality in data collection. In some cases, this reduced the volunteer survey capacity that had been built in year one delivery.

Further detail on how projects engaged volunteers in connecting people with nature activity is provided in [Section 3.4](#).

3.3.4 Partnerships and Landowner Engagement

Feedback from the survey suggests that 55 organisations formally supported project delivery, increasing from a total of 50 at the point of project application. Overall, 14 out of 20 projects had formal partnerships, although all projects were working in informal partnerships in some respect, whether this be with landowners and/or with local community groups. Projects indicated that partnerships varied considerably in form and intensity, and that informal, locally based partnerships were often as important to delivery as formal arrangements.

Several staff described SSF as strengthening existing partnerships rather than creating entirely new ones. In some cases, SSF provided capital to deliver work that had been discussed with landowners or partners for several years. Grantees

described work on third-party land where long-standing relationships with landholders helped to move delivery forward once capital funding became available.

‘[The] relationships were longstanding. Capital funding went to deliver what [we had] already been working on over the years. This injection of funding has been very positive and [we] have received very positive feedback from the landowners.’ **Staff, Workshop**

In other projects, SSF enabled partnerships to become more structured. Project-level evaluation evidence from WWT describes an existing relationship with Blue Carbon Farming formalised through the project, strengthening delivery around grazing and equipment and helping to build a wider farmer network.

Partnerships were also important for practical problem-solving, helping projects access land, identify contractors, provide technical advice, support surveys, share equipment and deliver activity that lead organisations could not have managed alone. Staff from one project described how informal partners including conservation volunteer groups, the Environment Agency and corporate volunteering groups helped maintain visible activity on site while larger works were still being set up.

However, formal partnership structures did not always guarantee shared strategic ownership. Staff noted that some formal partners were harder to engage at a strategic level than anticipated, particularly where partner organisations had limited capacity or competing priorities. Partnerships, staff reflected, were most productive where organisations had the time, capacity and practical reason to work together. Where partners were stretched or their role was narrow, partnership working tended to remain operational.

Staff continuity and dedicated coordination were also repeatedly identified as important to sustaining project partnerships. Grantees reported that partner relationships were easier to maintain where a coordinator or project manager remained in post, communicated regularly and brought partners together on site. Face-to-face working was also consistently valued, with site visits, joint surveys, delivery days and partner meetings helping to build shared understanding, particularly where partners had different organisational cultures or technical knowledge.

‘It got better [with] dedicated project manager resource. [That] helped when people come together face to face.’ **Staff, Workshop**

Several projects also described SSF as helping partners see themselves as part of a longer-term landscape effort. Project-level evaluation evidence from New Forest National Park Authority describes SSF as part of ‘a wider continuum of nature

recovery work', with relationships developed through the programme expected to extend beyond the funding period.

Projects indicated that landowner engagement was often a precondition for delivery rather than a distinct activity. For projects working across private or multiple sites, progress depended on whether landowners were willing to allow access, agree works and remain engaged when plans changed. Landowner engagement therefore extended well beyond initial permissions, frequently involving repeat contact, site visits and ongoing negotiation throughout delivery.

As highlighted in [Section 3.1](#), projects were better placed to progress habitat works where established landowner relationships were already in place. Project-level evaluation evidence from Derbyshire Wildlife Trust indicates that established informal partnerships with landowners gave the project flexibility to adapt quickly when circumstances changed, and that delivery would not have been possible without landowner cooperation. In some cases these relationships developed further over the course of delivery, with evidence from Ribble Rivers Trust suggesting landowners became increasingly proactive in seeking conservation works, bringing forward opportunities that might not otherwise have emerged within the programme period.

Staff described the complexity of working with landowners at different stages of changing land management, with different priorities and different levels of understanding about what the project could realistically deliver. It was also highlighted that where multiple landowners were involved in a single site, for example where rivers formed boundaries between different landholdings, coordination also became more complex.

'It was hard managing expectations and keeping them [landowners] on board with what the project had said they would do [where that conflicted] with landowners' wants.' **Staff, Workshop**

Building trust with new landowners, working through site-specific concerns and securing timely decisions often took longer than project timeframes could accommodate. Staff noted that 'stop-start funding' reduced landowner confidence, particularly where landowners were uncertain whether support would continue after a project ended. Despite these challenges, staff indicated that landowner engagement was largely positive across the programme. Where trust had been established, landowners became increasingly engaged in delivery, and in several cases, this enabled projects to deliver more than originally planned.

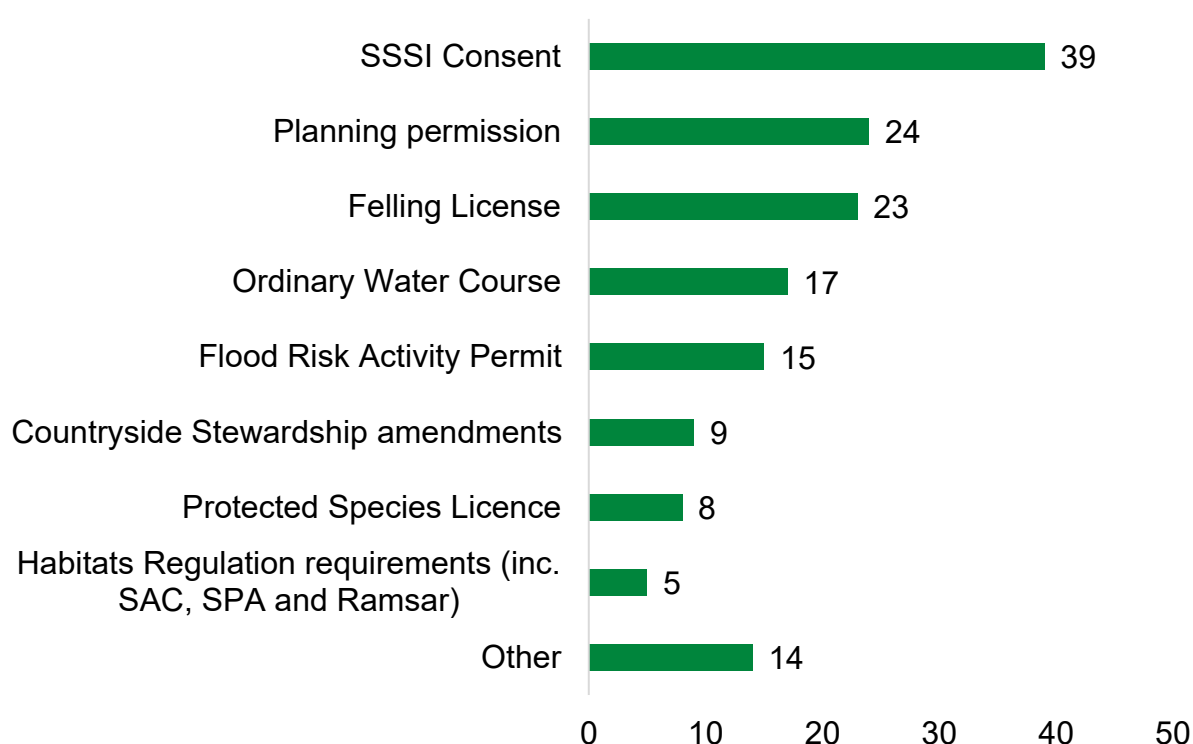
A key aspect of informal partnership working is engagement with landowners, including landowners in the public sector such as water companies, or private landowners such as farmers. Across the programme, over 122 landowner consent agreements have been signed, with landowners ranging from public bodies such as water companies to private farmers.

In addition, monitoring data suggests that 70 events were carried out that were focused on landowner engagement, with over 1,000 people attending. It should be noted that this figure reflects attendances at landowner-focused events rather than the number of unique landowners engaged or involved in programme delivery.

3.3.5 Permissions and Consents

Across the programme, projects invested a substantial proportion of time and resource in securing the wide range of statutory consents required to deliver activity. These included planning permissions, SSSI consents, flood risk and ordinary watercourse permits, protected species licences, land drainage consents, forestry permissions, and stewardship approvals, often from multiple statutory bodies. Figure 3.8 below sets out an estimate of the number of statutory consents or permissions secured.

Figure 3.8: Number of statutory consents or licenses by type



Base: Project claims (n=154 consents) This figure is drawn from project claims which included some incomplete data and therefore should be considered as an estimate.

Staff commonly reflected that the consents process was often complex and sequential, requiring early engagement with stakeholders, detailed technical evidence, iterative design changes, and coordination with relevant authorities. This process was coordinated with multiple arm's-length bodies, principally Natural England, Local Planning Authorities, the Environment Agency, the Forestry Commission, and the Rural Payments Agency, each exercising distinct regulatory functions. The scale and complexity of consenting represents a potential hidden cost for projects and highlights the importance of realistic timetabling.

3.3.6 Surveys and Monitoring

All SSF projects conducted monitoring surveys, with a total of 3,596 individual completed surveys. Over three-quarters (78%) of the surveys were conducted in wildlife-rich habitats.

Around three quarters of surveys carried out were species surveys (73% or 2,637 surveys). This included formal surveys using bioacoustics, eDNA sampling, or traditional survey methodologies, and more informal or ad hoc surveying activity associated with people engagement, such as bioblitzes or moth-trapping events. The New Forest National Park Authority's Re:New Nature project provides a strong example of the breadth of survey activity that SSF enabled, with volunteers trained to survey plants, invertebrates, fish and great crested newts across 32 sites, documenting over 1,100 species in total. Early signs of colonisation were recorded across habitat types, including Firecrest birds nesting in cleared woodland, sand lizards on restored heathland and species moving into new wetland areas.

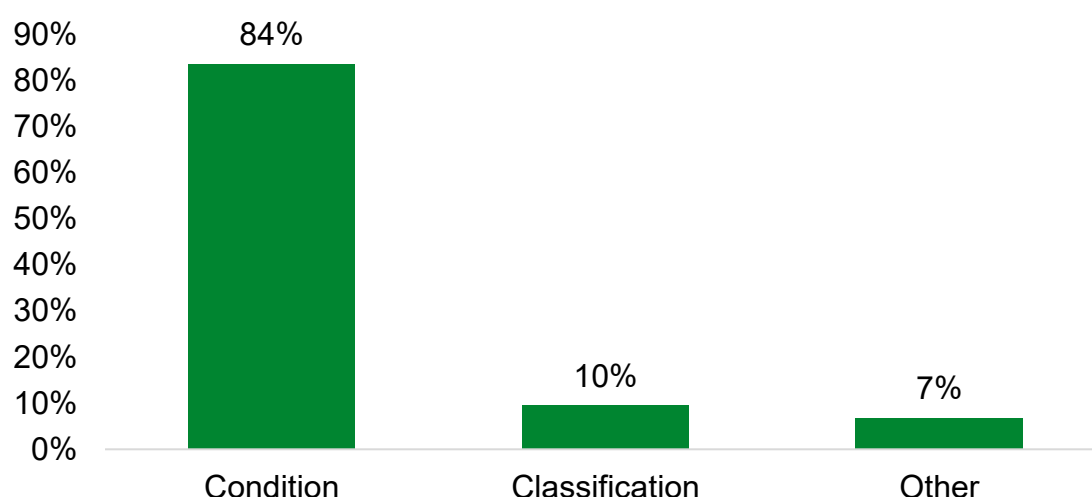
Table 3.5: Species surveys carried out by type

Species focus	Number of surveys conducted	% of species surveys (n=2,637)	% of all surveys conducted (n=3,596)
Pollinators (bees, moths, butterflies)	791	30%	22%
Amphibians	736	28%	20%
Mammals	255	10%	7%
Fish	183	7%	5%
Invasive non-native species (INNS)	171	6%	5%
Other insects and invertebrates	121	5%	3%
Birds	120	5%	3%
Reptiles	41	1.6%	1.1%
Plants and fungi	19	0.7%	0.5%
Multiple survey types	34	1.2%	0.9%
No specific focus	166	6%	5%
Total	2,637	100%	73%

Base: Monitoring information. Please note that where a species survey is recorded as 'no specific focus' this includes activities such as bioblitzes.

Habitat surveys accounted for just under a third of surveys (29%). As illustrated by Figure 3.10 below and Table 3.6 below, habitat surveys varied in focus and methodology.

Figure 3.9: Proportion of habitat surveys by type



Base: Monitoring information (n=1,038).

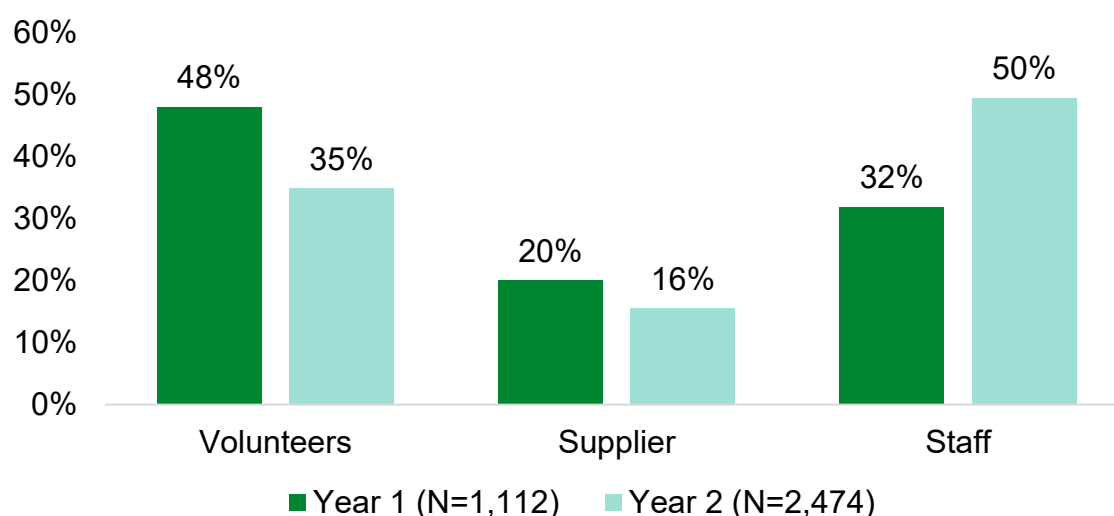
Table 3.6: Habitat condition survey by type

Condition Survey focus	Number of surveys conducted	% of habitat surveys (n=868)	% of all surveys (n=3,596)
Freshwater	485	56%	13%
Woodlands	189	22%	5%
Pollinator habitats	37	4%	1%
Soil	20	2%	1%
Wetland	11	1.2%	0.3%
Other	5	0.6%	0.1%
Not specified	121	14%	3%
Total	868	100%	24%

Base: Monitoring information.

A range of people contributed to the completion of habitat and species surveys, including project staff, external suppliers and volunteers. In total, staff completed the largest proportion of surveys (44% or 1,584 surveys), followed by volunteers at 39% (or 1,402 surveys) and suppliers (17% or 610 surveys). Monitoring information shows a notable shift between the two years of delivery, with volunteers carrying out the majority of surveys in year one and staff taking on a greater proportion in year two as delivery intensified and quality assurance requirements increased.

Figure 3.10: Proportion of monitoring surveys completed by volunteers, staff and suppliers, by year



Base: Monitoring information (n=3,596).

In some cases, project-level evaluations have indicated that SSF strengthened organisational confidence in selecting survey methods, commissioning specialist work and using ecological evidence more systematically to guide site management. In several projects, this included establishing baseline surveys or condition assessments where no consistent baseline had previously existed, using approaches such as habitat condition surveys, UKHab mapping, botanical surveys, camera traps and specialist monitoring. This gave projects a clearer starting point for future management, reporting and adaptive decision-making, rather than relying on partial or ad hoc evidence.

Projects also reported a number of challenges in delivering monitoring activity. Some staff found specialist survey work difficult to procure or had to balance participatory monitoring with the need for staff-led surveys as delivery pressure increased. Several projects reflected that monitoring systems would have been more robust had evaluation partners, survey methods and data collection arrangements been agreed earlier in delivery. Where this was confirmed later, projects were more likely to rely on partial baseline information, retrospective data collection or less consistent approaches across sites and activities. In practice, this affected the ability to establish a clear starting point for measuring change, to align monitoring with delivery from the outset and to ensure that evidence collected during the project could support both future site management and programme-level evaluation. For future programmes, where monitoring is expected to inform long-term management as well as evaluation, it should be treated as part of project design from the earliest stages rather than finalised once delivery is underway.

3.3.7 Green Finance

Where projects reported having undertaken activity around green finance, this was most commonly at an early developmental stage. In final interviews, grantees commonly reported having developed evidence, management plans, monitoring

systems, delivery experience and partner relationships that could support future funding conversations, but that the translation of these outputs into green finance had not yet been achieved for most.

Staff most frequently described developing stronger evidence and site planning through their SSF project activity. In these cases, the establishment and development of baseline surveys, monitoring equipment and management plans was felt to give some organisations a better basis for demonstrating what has changed on sites and what could be delivered in future. Several staff saw this evidence base as important for future investment conversations, even where they had not yet identified a specific green finance route.

‘Green finance [is a] difficult one to do. I think it's around the monitoring side of things to help develop the baselines of things. I think we'll be able to demonstrate improvement when we're applying for green finance in the future. Our management plans will also be good for demonstrating that we have investable plans.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

The project-level evaluation from Derbyshire Wildlife Trust provides a detailed account of what green finance development looked like in practice. The project initially aimed to bring together multiple businesses and landowners into a single private funding model, but found this was not achievable within the programme timeframe. Staff reflected that the green finance market was not yet sufficiently mature, and that coordinating multiple parties within a two-year window proved too complex. The project faced a considerable barrier to development when it was established that interventions already funded through SSF were ineligible for the main voluntary nature market standards. The project adapted by developing an investment-ready green finance case for a single large landowner as a natural capital exemplar and built internal capacity in using nature market standard tools including emissions calculators and registration processes for the Peatland Code, Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and Wilder Carbon. More detail on this approach can be found in the Derbyshire Wildlife Trust SSF Case Study.

Several other projects also made progress in developing their green finance readiness. For example, Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust used SSF to develop capacity and skills within their processes, stress-testing internal governance, procurement and financial oversight systems to ensure the organisation was better placed to absorb future large-scale funding or private investment.

A minority of grantees reported uncertainty around BNG, particularly around how habitat improvement activity funded through SSF interacted with biodiversity net gain requirements. In some cases, projects found themselves navigating planning processes that treated habitat improvement works as requiring BNG mitigation, creating an unexpected tension between the aims of the programme and local planning obligations.

‘Planning permission was a really, really big headache for us. Our local council was requesting that we provided BNG mitigation for the work that we were proposing, which was this really [...] weird situation to find ourselves in because we’re trying to improve habitat inherently in the work that we’re delivering.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

Several grantees reflected that, where green finance was an intended future route, they should have built monitoring and baseline requirements and resource into their project plans from the outset. Staff acknowledged that a stronger early evidence base would have made it easier to develop investment cases and model wider ecosystem benefits.

‘If there was more capacity, I would have liked to commission some modelling that goes beyond species and looks at ecosystems. This would have allowed us to consider green financing [...] Having a year front-ended to the projects would be helpful to collect an accurate baseline.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

For future programmes where green finance is an intended outcome, projects will need clear guidance and realistic expectation setting from the outset about what is required and how they might go about pursuing it within the programme timeframe.

3.4 Connecting People with Nature

This section explores how connecting people with nature project activity has progressed in the final year of delivery, including grantee perceptions of strengths, challenges and learning identified.

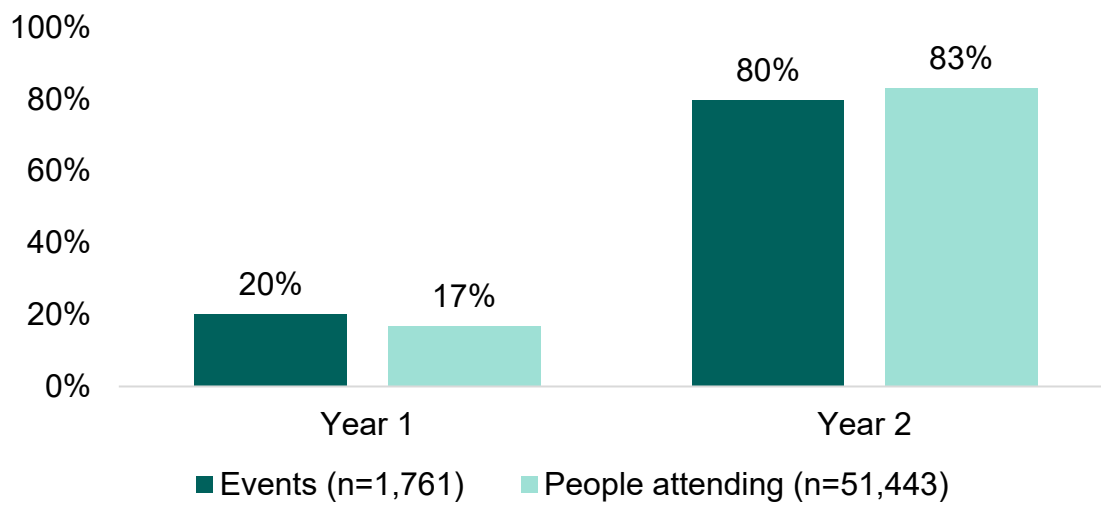
3.4.1 Connecting People with Nature

Throughout the lifetime of SSF, projects organised 1,761 events (1,734 in-person and 27 online) with 51,443 people attending.⁴ As illustrated in 3.11 below, the majority of events took place in the second year of delivery (80% or 1,406 events).

Average attendance per event increased in the second year because the mix of activities shifted towards school sessions, festivals and other large-scale events. These activities typically attract larger audiences than workshops and guided walks, which accounted for a greater share of delivery in the first year.

⁴ Please note that this figure excludes attendance at large-scale events where it was not possible to directly attribute attendance to SSF project activity, such as fairs or large public events where projects were present with a stall or stand.

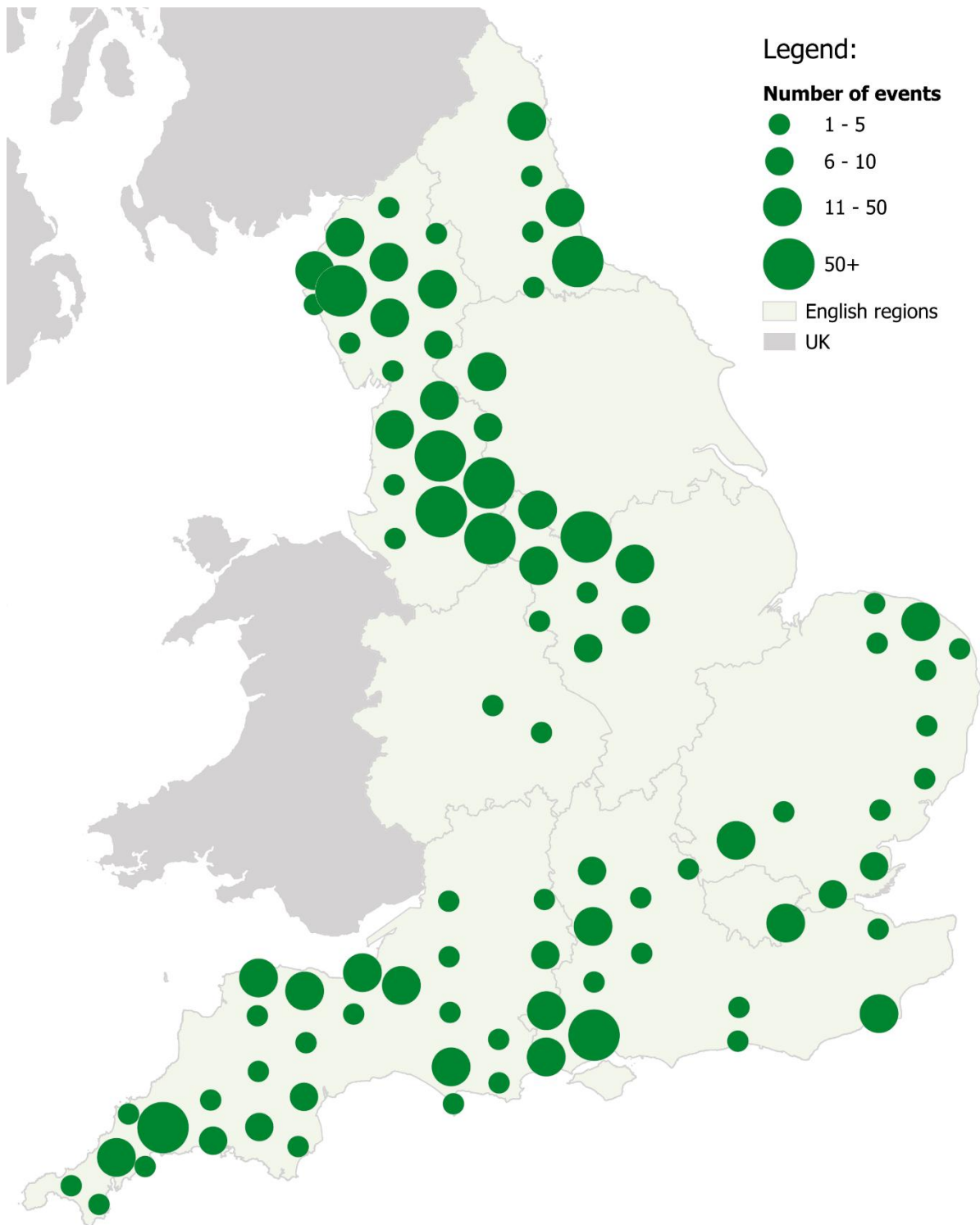
Figure 3.11: Events and people engaged in Year 1 and Year 2



Base: Monitoring information. Please note that the number of people attending excludes attendance at large-scale events, while the number of events does include large scale events.

Figure 3.12 below and Table 3.7 below demonstrate that engagement activity took place across England.

Figure 3.12: Number of events mapped



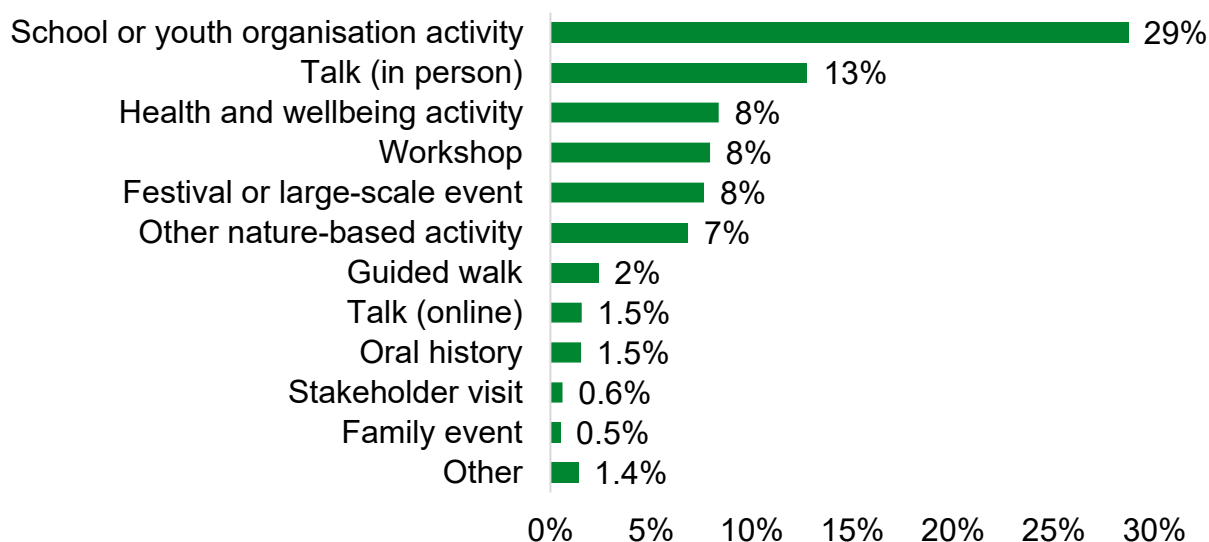
Base: Monitoring information (n=1,734 Events). Please note that some events are not represented because they took place online. Event locations are shown at an aggregated grid-cell level rather than their precise locations. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2026.

Table 3.7: Events and people attending by region

Region	Number of events	Number of people attending
North West	610	19,409
South West	368	10,969
South East	264	4,274
East of England	131	2,893
Yorkshire and The Humber	127	3,862
North East	123	4,943
East Midlands	108	1,701
West Midlands	2	23
London	1	1,400
Online	27	1,969
Total	1,761	51,443

Figures 3.13 and 3.14, below, demonstrate that projects sought to engage people multiple ways. In the second year of delivery, school and youth organisation activities were the most common mode of engagement, at 29% of events (394 events). This marks a shift; in year one, workshops were the most common event type. This likely reflects that, as projects progressed into year two, they established and grew their relationships with schools.

Figure 3.13: Proportion of events by event type



Base: Monitoring information (n=1,761).

Schools and youth organisation activity accounted for nearly half of all events attendees (48% or 16,692 people), followed by festivals and large-scale events at 40% (13,816 people). It should be noted that these figures exclude attendance at large-scale events where projects were present with a stall or stand, which account for over 54,000 additional people entries. These have been excluded on the basis that total event attendance figures were reported rather than the number of

individuals who directly engaged with project activity, meaning the figures could not be reliably attributed to SSF project activity.

Figure 3.14: Event attendance by event type

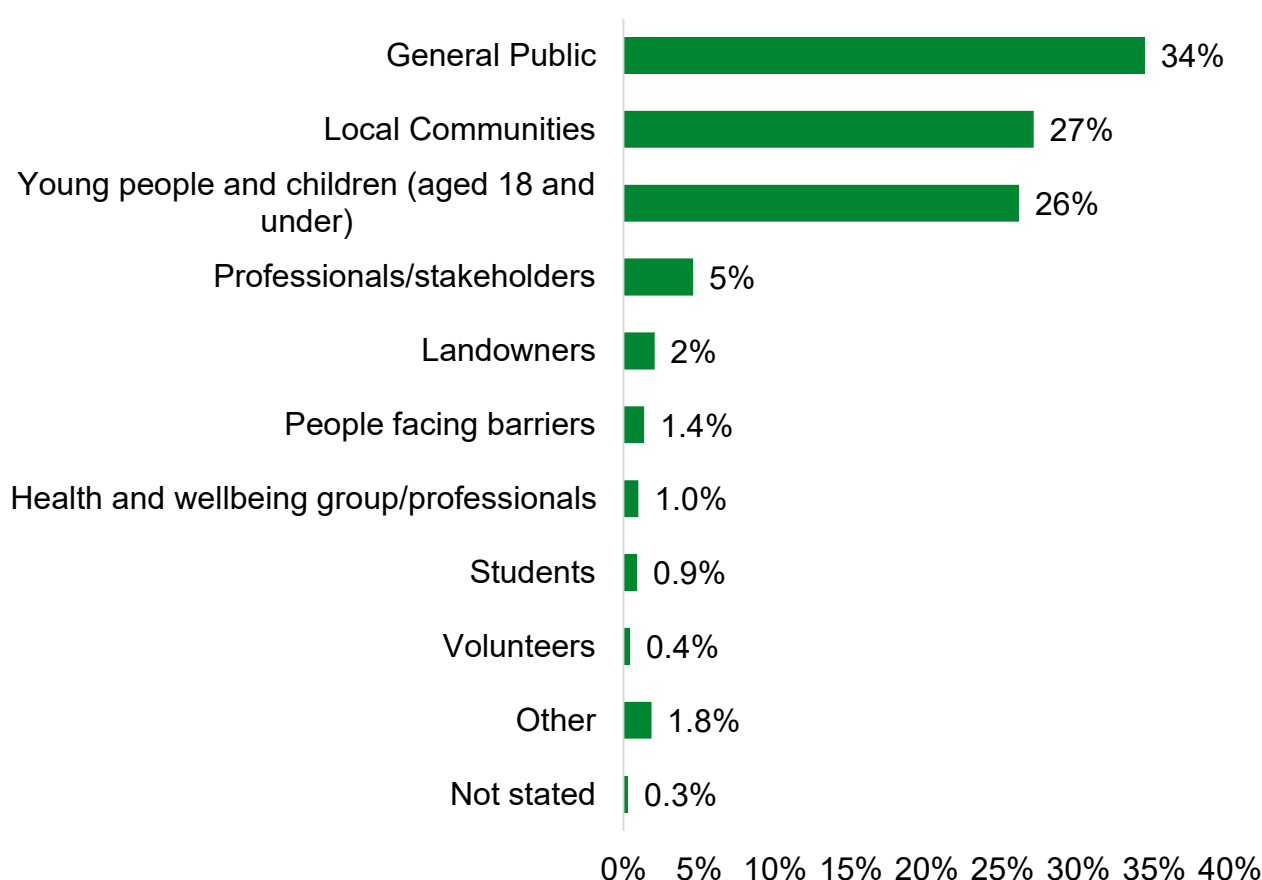


Base: Monitoring information (n=51,433).

Projects most frequently ran events targeted at young people and children, accounting for 32% of events. However, as illustrated in Figure 3.15 below, they represented a slightly smaller share of total attendees at 26% (13,416), suggesting that projects aimed at this group tended to be delivered in smaller, more focused settings.

Local communities were the second largest audience, making up 30% of events and 27% of attendees. The general public, whilst featuring in fewer projects and events (19% of events), accounted for the largest share of total attendees at 34% (17,681).

Figure 3.15: Event attendance by target audience



Base: Monitoring information (n= 51,443).

3.4.2 Approaches to Engagement

When reflecting on connecting people with nature activity, staff frequently reported that their projects used a diverse range of approaches. This included practical conservation tasks, school sessions, guided walks, Citizen Science, wellbeing activity, volunteer days, community talks, green skills training, creative activity and one-off public events. In most cases, projects combined one-off activity, which brought people onto sites for the first time, with more sustained volunteering or training programmes that supported longer-term participation.

Connecting people with nature activity was not always as straightforward as grantees had anticipated. Staff consistently noted that engagement activity took longer to build than habitat delivery because it depended on trust, visibility and repeated contact. Projects typically needed an initial phase of outreach and relationship-building before participation increased, and this was particularly true where organisations were working with schools, new community groups or sites that were not already well used by local people. In several projects, the first few months were spent getting to know local areas, building links with community organisations and testing what types of activity attracted interest.

‘The first 6 months was getting to know the towns, building links with local town councils, organisations, community groups, other people’s events to promote the project. Making links.’ **Staff, Workshop**

‘We technically had zero volunteers at the start. In Q1, we had 3 people at our events, then by Q4 we would be fully booked with 8-10 people at events’ **Staff, Final Interview**

Several projects reported that the second year of delivery was more productive because the groundwork had been undertaken in year one. Staff reported to have learnt which activities people responded to, built relationships with schools and community groups, and developed more materials and put in place appropriate and relevant communications.

‘In the first year it was all about developing our resources and what we could offer people, once we had materials we were able to be much more reactive to the wants and needs of local people.’ **Staff, Workshop**

Grantees frequently reported that the most effective activities were practical and local to their participants. Hands-on tasks such as planting, surveying, hedge laying and habitat management were consistently perceived as effective in helping participants see what they were contributing to and how the site was changing. Groundwork Greater Manchester’s Green Skills sessions, delivered in partnership with The Conservation Volunteers, were cited as a particularly effective example within the project-level evaluation, of a regular, practical activity that helped people build confidence and encouraging continued involvement over time.

Staff also highlighted the value of offering variety across activity types, including guided walks, family events, festivals, talks, school sessions, practical tasks, creative activities and digital tools, noting that different approaches appealed to different people and supported different levels of involvement.

‘Having the variety is good to keep the momentum going; different kinds of animals, different ways of surveying. People learn new knowledge and skills with different methods.’ **Staff, Workshop**

Project staff frequently also reported that how activity was described and structured affected who took part, with framing and format mattering as much as the activity itself. This was particularly evident in how projects structured participation.

‘The demographic we’ve struggled with is working age. [We have learnt that it] is useful to do drop-in sessions, people don’t have to be registered volunteers, they can turn up and leave when they want. That’s been useful learning.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

Partnership working was also consistently identified as a strength. Projects that worked through trusted intermediaries, including schools, community organisations, mental health organisations, refugee charities and accessibility groups, reported being better placed to reach people who might not have joined an environmental activity through an open invitation. Trusted partners helped projects understand local needs, promote activity through familiar channels and adapt sessions to different groups.

A further strength, evident in multiple projects, was the use of community-led grant funds. Where grantees had designed small grants into their project delivery model, they reported that these helped local groups shape activity in ways that felt relevant and accessible, rather than taking part only in activity designed by the delivery organisation. Derbyshire Wildlife Trust described their community fund as a ‘real way into those conversations with communities.’ Project-level evaluation evidence suggests that this approach helped build local pride and ownership and, in some cases, widened the social reach of projects.

The main challenges reported were staff capacity, continuity and the time needed to build relationships. Several projects lost key engagement staff during delivery, which reduced their ability to follow up one-off participation or keep newer groups involved. In practice, this meant that some projects were trying to develop community engagement at the same point that staffing capacity was becoming less stable. Staff commonly reflected that projects underestimated how much staff time was needed to support engagement alongside other project delivery pressures.

Staff also reported that free public events could attract considerable interest, but that non-attendance after booking was a recurring issue, with projects responding in different ways including increasing available places, shifting to drop-in formats or amending how events were promoted. School and youth engagement also took more effort than some projects expected. Where schools did engage, relationships could be productive and repeat visits were possible, but getting to that point often required repeated contact and practical support.

‘Schools can be difficult with uptake, they’re really busy [...] Once you’re in there it’s fine but getting that relationship is difficult. It’s key to ensure that we align it with their curriculum.’ **Staff, Workshop**

3.4.3 Engaging Underserved Audiences

Projects actively sought to reach people who were new to nature, new to conservation activity or new to the sites involved. This included schools, young people, unemployed people, disabled people, people with additional learning needs, asylum seekers, local community groups and people living in areas with limited access to nature. Engaging these audiences required more active outreach than many projects had initially anticipated and was most successful where grantees worked through trusted intermediaries rather than relying on open invitations alone. Staff suggested that people were more willing to engage when an invitation came through someone they already knew or when activity was delivered as part of an existing group.

Project activity to engage new audiences was most successful where grantees worked through trusted intermediaries rather than relying on open invitations, reducing barriers to participation and helping reach people who might not otherwise have engaged with an environmental activity. Staff suggested that these organisations helped reduce barriers to participation and supported engagement from groups less likely to join open-access activity.

In some cases, this meant delivering activity through partner settings. In others, it meant supporting participants to access nature sites that were new to them. For example, staff from RSPB described working with young people through the King's Trust, alongside engagement with carers, refugee and asylum-seeker groups and a local accessibility group. Staff found that involving the accessibility group was particularly useful in encouraging visits to the RSPB Dungeness site, as the group also helped shape thinking about how the site could become more accessible, including through the development of wheelchair-friendly paths.

Several projects changed their approach in response to this learning. In year one, some projects relied more heavily on advertised events or expected participants to come to them. By year two, staff reported shifting towards more targeted outreach, working through existing groups and taking activity into places where people already were, including community venues, schools, libraries, festivals, village halls and online spaces:

'We have focused on outreach rather than hoping people would come along. If people know what they're doing with who they know they're more confident, people coming as groups works better than individual.' **Staff, Workshop**

As might be expected, new participants were most commonly reached through one-off activities such as open days, targeted sessions with partner groups or introductory events. Where individuals went on to engage repeatedly, grantees and staff frequently reported that this was where people felt welcome, where sites were accessible and where there were meaningful activities that they could contribute to. Where projects did retain participants or volunteers over time, staff linked this to

greater confidence on site, closer social ties with staff and other volunteers, and a growing sense of responsibility for project sites. In some cases, staff also described repeat participants taking on more regular roles in volunteering, monitoring or practical site care. These wider social and stewardship outcomes are explored further in [Section 4.4](#).

‘The ones that come to a one-off, they connect to nature on the day and they have a great time [...] but the real impact is when people say this is my favourite day of the week.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

Projects also tested different types of activity to reach people who might not identify with traditional conservation volunteering, with practical and interactive approaches working particularly well where they felt accessible and did not require prior knowledge. Examples included hand lenses, VR headsets where sites were not accessible, social cinema nights, wildlife gardening, pond creation, willow workshops, photography, online games, audio benches and creative interpretation.

Schools were a key audience for many projects but, as highlighted in [Section 3.4.2](#), were consistently described as time-intensive to engage. Staff reported that primary schools were often more accessible than secondary schools, partly because activities could be linked more readily to the curriculum. Where relationships were established, repeat visits were possible and some schools became more independent in using sites. Where sites were difficult to reach, some projects adapted by delivering activity in school settings instead, including bringing species and habitat materials into classrooms and running modified sessions.

Engaging young people outside school settings, particularly those aged 11 to 16, was also challenging. Some projects trialled social prescribing pathways, university partnerships and youth-focused activities, finding that practical experience, employability links and creative activity were most effective where young people did engage.

‘We have a gap in engagement for the secondary school age. We trialled a group for 11-16 year olds, advertised through social prescribing pathways. We hadn't done it before, but it was really positive.’ **Staff, Workshop**

Transport was the most consistently cited challenge in engaging people in project activity. Reaching people who were new to nature depended on both effective outreach and whether participants could realistically get to a site and use it comfortably once they were there. Remote sites with no or limited public transport, or sites without adequate basic facilities such as toilets, parking or covered space, limited who could take part, particularly schools and groups unfamiliar with sites. Project-level evaluation evidence from Dorset Wildlife Trust provides a clear

example, where the absence of toilets, covered space and parking suitable for minibuses limited the project's ability to engage schools, community groups and people with accessibility needs. In some cases, projects responded by using minibuses, volunteer drivers, travel funds or more accessible partner settings. As highlighted by one staff member,

‘[We have a] remote nature reserve with no public transport so it is hard to engage community groups [...] we would put money aside for public transport in the future.’ **Staff, Reflective Workshop**

This suggests that engaging new audiences requires deliberate planning and dedicated resource from the outset. Additionally, that some barriers to participation are structural rather than communications-related, and, therefore, cannot be addressed through outreach alone. Inclusive engagement was most effective where projects planned early for transport, accessibility, basic site facilities and where activities were being delivered.

3.4.4 Infrastructure

A wide range of infrastructure has been improved to provide access or engagement with nature across 14 projects, including new footpaths, bird hides, boardwalks, interpretation boards, signage, culverts, parking improvements, benches and gates. This includes over 6,250m of new footpaths, of which nearly half are accessible (2,753m or 44%). The below table sets out the footpaths created across England.

Table 3.8: Footpath creation by region

Region	New footpath - length in metres	Of new footpath - accessible footpath in metres	% of new footpath accessible
North West	2,164	0	0%
South West	1,523	1,522	100%
Yorkshire and The Humber	1,149	0	0%
South East	1,090	1,090	100%
North East	335	126	38%
East of England	15	15	100%
Total	6,276	2,753	44%

Base: Monitoring information (n=6,276 m footpaths).

In addition, 5 new buildings have been created (e.g., bird hides) and 72 new pieces of signage, and 31 other types of infrastructure, such as benches and gates, were installed.

Staff reflected that infrastructure helped to enable connecting people with nature. Staff frequently suggested these works were most valuable where they were tied

directly to how people would use the site, rather than treated as standalone capital outputs.

Projects also used infrastructure, including interpretation boards and other visible access works, as part of their wider approach to public engagement. Staff frequently found this useful because it gave them practical and visible ways to explain why sites looked different during delivery, particularly where ecological works such as tree felling, pond creation or vegetation clearance might otherwise have been difficult for visitors to understand.

Similarly to challenges faced in habitat-based activity, procurement, contractor availability and consents affected the timing of infrastructure works. Anti-social behaviour was also a significant issue in some locations, with vandalism, theft of plants and damage from off-road bikes creating safety concerns, damaging physical outputs and, in some cases, limiting where or how projects could engage people.

Project-level evaluation feedback from Sheffield City Council suggests that visible investment in the site, including a sculpture trail and public events such as a Lantern event, helped raise local awareness of the area and attract families and people who had not previously engaged with the site. Staff also reflected that the project helped build positive relationships across the community, connecting existing volunteer groups with new participants. However, challenges linked to anti-social behaviour, including issues with off-road motorbikes in the project area, remained throughout delivery, and staff noted that improved perceptions of the site did not fully resolve its wider reputational challenges. This suggests that time-limited investment in project sites can support confidence and visibility but cannot resolve wider site management challenges, which require multi-agency approaches over a longer period.

4 Impact Evaluation

The impact evaluation provides an overview of project activity completed by the end of the programme, including how this activity performed against expected targets, the perceived impact of activity and project perceptions of likely longer-term impacts.

4.1 Benefits to Nature

This subsection explores key outcomes and impacts on nature, including action to create or restore wildlife-rich habitats that will contribute to the statutory target. It provides a review of the ecological impacts and contributions to habitat connectivity. Findings in this section draw on the full range of evidence sources outlined in the Methodology, including the independent ecological assessment of spatial data.

4.1.1 Overview

SSF delivered a total of 4,800 hectares of habitat action across England, representing a considerable contribution to nature recovery across England. This includes 654 hectares of habitat creation (14%), 686 hectares of habitat restoration (14%) and 3,460 hectares of habitat under active management (72%). Additionally, 97 hectares of actions could not be confirmed as to which type of activity it was.

At application stage, projects collectively estimated a total project area of 10,535 hectares, reflecting the broad geographic footprint within which their activity would take place. Once awarded, projects refined this to an anticipated total of 7,316 hectares, again reflecting the area covered by project activity rather than the specific habitat interventions to be delivered within it. At this stage, projects also provided a more specific estimate of 3,633 hectares relating to the area over which habitat interventions were expected to deliver direct benefit to habitats, distinct from the broader area covered by project activity.

This progressive narrowing reflects a typical and expected feature of environmental delivery. As projects completed baseline surveys, secured landowner permissions, and refined their understanding of site conditions and ecological priorities, estimates of the area over which interventions would deliver measurable habitat benefit became more precise. The 3,633 hectare figure therefore represents the more directly comparable baseline against which to assess delivery, as it reflects the specific interventions projects expected to undertake rather than the wider area within which they were working.

Against this baseline, SSF projects delivered 4,800 hectares of habitat action, exceeding the anticipated intervention area by over 1,100 hectares (32%). This is consistent with projects' own reporting that they met or exceeded their aims and reflects the extent to which projects were able to expand and adapt delivery as opportunities arose.

Supporting reporting towards the statutory habitat target forms one part of the impact evaluation. The statutory habitat target was set in early 2023 and SSF project awards were made that summer, before the definitions required to report against the

target had been published, meaning that neither fund design nor project planning could fully account for what activity would ultimately count towards the target. Early indications suggest that approximately 16% of the 4,800 hectares of habitat action delivered will count towards the statutory habitat target. Official reporting towards the statutory habitat target will be produced by Defra as part of the Biodiversity Indicators, with additional analysis undertaken to account for overlaps with delivery reported by other partners and mechanisms.

The statutory habitat target set out in the Environmental Targets (Biodiversity) Regulations (2023) states: '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 and relies on the assumption that habitats of sufficient quality will be restored if the correct actions are undertaken. It is important to note that not all habitat action delivered through SSF will contribute to this target. Management activity does not count towards the statutory habitat target, which focuses specifically on creation and restoration of wildlife-rich habitats. However, habitat management is crucial for delivering the statutory species targets and has been central to the programme's aims and essential for the long-term condition of restored habitats.

Following submission of the spatial data by projects, steps were taken to validate, clean and triangulate the data to ensure it met the requirements of the statutory habitat target. Since the target is action-based, a key aspect of the analysis process was the confidence assessment, which sought:

- 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 recognised 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 was to consider the overall confidence that the action taken will lead to wildlife-rich habitat of sufficient quality. This process considered 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 UKHab categories. Full details on the UKHab classification hierarchy can be found on their [website](#). Each of the following habitat sub-sections ([4.1.2.](#), [4.1.3.](#), and [4.1.4](#)) sets out the relevant spatial data and ecological review,

alongside project perceptions of impact and likely long-term outcomes for that habitat type.

Action to Create, Restore or Manage Habitats

Table 4.1 below sets out where habitat action has taken place. Over half of the area worked on occurred within the North East and South West regions, with 1,284 hectares (27%) and 1,229 hectares (26%) observed respectively, followed by the South East with 860 ha (18%).

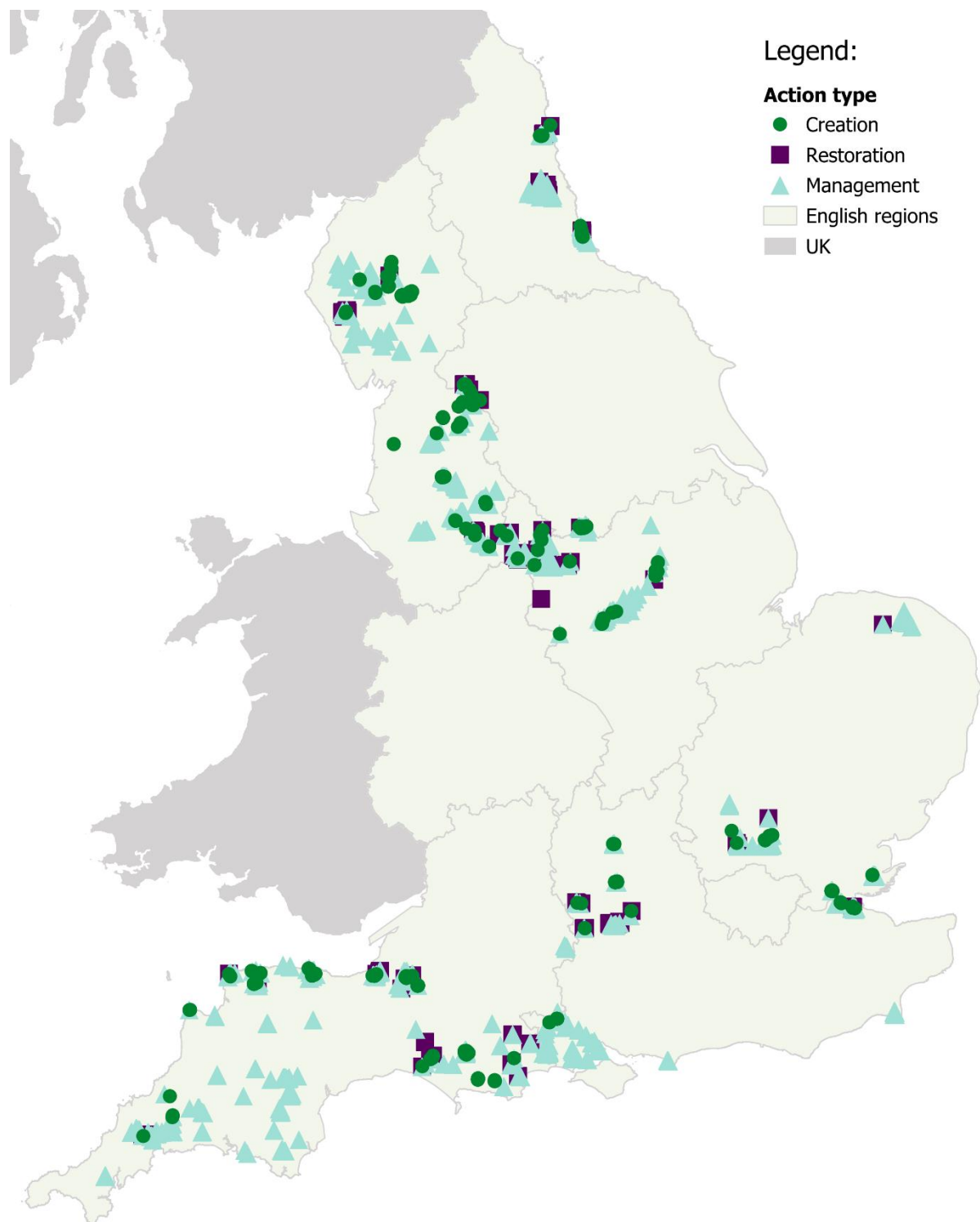
Table 4.1 Area of all SSF-funded actions on habitats, by region and action type

Region	Creation activities (ha)	Restoration activities (ha)	Management activities (ha)	Total area (ha)	% area
East Midlands	32	185	461	678	14%
East of England	4	1	367	371	8%
North East	30	51	213	295	6%
North West	160	162	961	1,284	27%
South East	25	223	612	860	18%
South West	394	62	774	1,229	26%
Yorkshire and The Humber	9	3	72	84	2%
Total	654	686	3460	4,800	100%

Base: Spatial data (n=20 projects). Please note these values do not include the 97 ha reported with no action type. Due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

The map below visualises where and what habitat action type (habitat creation, restoration, or management) has taken place across all SSF projects (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1: Mapped area of all completed SSF-funded actions



Base: Final project spatial data. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2026.

Examining the habitat categories that are being reported on, activities most commonly took place within the Grassland, Heathland and Woodland broad habitat category (3,685 hectares), predominantly with management actions (2,587 hectares)

(Table 4.2). The Wetland and Coastal category areas totalled 583 hectares, largely due to management efforts (416 hectares). Other notable areas of work were within the Rivers and Lakes category (300 hectares), predominantly driven by management activities. In Table 4.2, the 'Other' category represents work done on arable and horticultural habitats (91 hectares), sparsely vegetated land (5 hectares) and urban environments (47 hectares). 91 hectares of actions had no baseline or target habitat report, and the actions were described, if available, such that it was not possible to reasonably classify (e.g., 'management of invasive species').

Table 4.2 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
Grassland, Heathland and Woodland	505	593	2,587	3,685	77%
Rivers and Lakes	40	33	227	300	6%
Wetland and Coastal	106	60	416	582	12%
Other	2	-	139	141	3%
Unknown habitat	-	-	91.4	94.1	2%
Total	654	686	3,460	4,800	100%

Base: Spatial data (n=20 projects). Please note: These values do not include the 96.7 ha reported with no action type. Due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

Most of the actions have taken place outside of protected sites, with 2% of spatial data submitted located within protected sites (917/4,800 hectares) (Table 4.3). Within protected sites, 39 hectares of habitat were included in conservation activities, consisting of 13 hectares of creation and 26 hectares of restoration. Most of the work (879 hectares) was management activities. The largest area of work completed was in the Grassland, Heathland and Woodland broad habitat category, accounting for 623 hectares, with most of the activities focusing on management (604 hectares). Activities across the Wetland and Coastal category outside of protected sites (238 hectares) were also mostly management activities (221 hectares). Similarly, under the Rivers and Lake category (52 hectares) activities were mostly limited to management work (49 hectares).

Table 4.3 Area of all SSF-funded actions on habitats taking place in protected sites, by broad habitat and action type

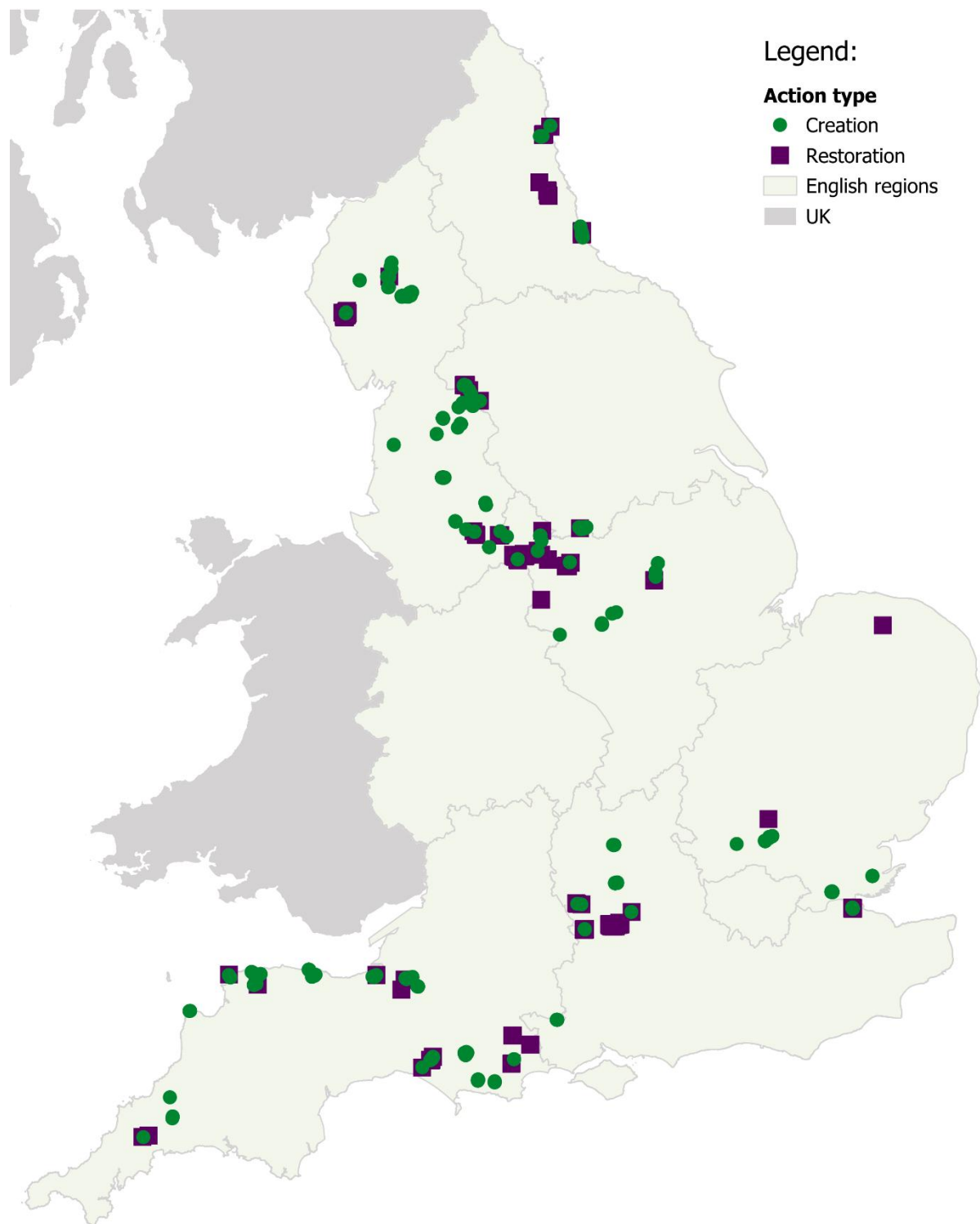
Broad Habitat	Creation activities (ha)	Restoration activities (ha)	Management activities (ha)	Total area (ha)	% area
Grassland, Heathland and Woodland	10	9	604	623	68%
Rivers and Lakes	2	1	49	52	6%
Wetland and Coastal	2	16	221	238	26%
Other	-	-	1	1	0%
Unknown	-	-	3	3	0%
Total	13	26	879	917	100%

Base: Spatial data (n=18 projects). Please note that due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

Action to Create or Restore Wildlife-rich Habitats

Nineteen of 20 organisations completed actions that will likely contribute to the statutory target for wildlife-rich habitat. Most of the reported works are restoration works and the South West region reported the largest overall area of wildlife rich activity. The North West and South East regions also reported high proportions of wildlife rich activities.

Figure 4.2: Mapped area of likely wildlife-rich habitats created and restored, by region and action type



Base: Final project spatial data. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2026.

The largest habitat theme targeted for action were Grassland, Heathland and Woodland, where most of these actions were restoration efforts compared to the creation of habitats

Habitat Connectivity

A key aspect of the SSF was 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’.

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.

Strategic Significance

The strategic significance of SSF-funded activity is understood in terms of action on habitat and the consideration of how a specific parcel of habitat sits within its landscape context and is determined with reference to local policies and other environmental objectives. This includes the statutory requirement for Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) that establish priorities and map proposals for specific actions to drive nature’s recovery and provide wider environmental benefits.

As part of SSF’s application process, projects were asked to evidence the need for their proposed activity and their alignment with national and local plans, which further informs the analysis of the strategic significance of funded projects. Whilst project applied to SSF in advance of LNRS plans being finalised, many delivered activity that may contribute to or inform Local Nature Recovery Strategies. Analysis of project application data suggests that the majority of projects (18/20 or 90%) had referenced a forthcoming LNRS in their application. Additionally, SSF-funded project activity was delivered across 30 of the 48 Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) areas in England.

However, final interviews with project staff suggest that whilst alignment with local environmental strategies was generally considered at the application stage, in practice this varied depending on the maturity of local plans, organisational roles and strategic focus. In areas where Local Nature Recovery Strategies were still emerging, alignment was often implicit rather than explicit, with projects contributing evidence rather than responding to defined priorities.

4.1.2 Rivers and Lakes

Ecological Review

Fifteen projects delivered actions across Rivers and Lakes. The actions carried out covered a series of interconnected, nature-based interventions to improve ecological integrity and climate resilience. The action efforts focused on revitalising physical watercourse features through barrier removal to restore habitat connectivity, channel morphological re-naturalisation to reinstate historical meanders, and floodplain and wetland widening to absorb peak flows. Instream habitat management and riparian canopy regulation actions were carried out to establish refugia and diverse

ecological niches, while erosion control and bank stabilisation actions were carried out to mitigate downstream siltation. Many actions recognised the importance of scaling these efforts to the wider landscape and targeted agricultural and catchment improvements alongside proactive invasive species and wildlife management to secure long-term biodiversity recovery.

Two projects completed actions that qualified as Restoration and Creation on rivers and streams where the baseline habitat was recorded as grassland that was not considered already wildlife-rich habitat.

One project, through stream bank lowering, increased water storage capacity during high-flow events while making the stream dynamic and creating slow-flowing backwater refuges for juvenile fish. Another project installed leaky dams and planted trees, which created structural variation in the watercourse, diversified the surrounding habitat, and provided essential shade. A third project focused on locating and breaking land drains while adding overland flow spreaders made from woody debris to distribute surface water. Finally, a project re-naturalised and de-culverted moorland watercourses, using leaky dams to significantly improve the health of the riparian corridor.

Other projects completed actions that fell under Management activities with the baseline habitat recorded as priority wildlife-rich river habitat. The management actions broadly fell under the following categories:

- Barrier removal and improved connectivity
- Channel morphological re-naturalisation
- Floodplain and wetland habitat widening
- Instream habitat management
- Riparian canopy and vegetation management
- Erosion control and bank stabilisation
- Agricultural and catchment improvements
- Invasive species and wildlife management

Five of these projects delivered Management actions that focused on the removal of artificial structures, weirs, and revetments combined with the installation of rock ramps, cascades, and fish passes; the aim was to eliminate migratory barriers to open-up extensive upstream fish spawning habitat.

Management actions to realign artificially straightened rivers were carried out by four projects, and included activities such as re-wiggling, and reconnecting river tributaries to historic meander. Other actions included raising over-deep beds with gravel, re-grading steep banks, and adding riffles and berms.

Other projects carried out physical modification actions through the lowering of artificial banks, widening streams, and creating a network of pools, scrapes, and bunds to strengthen floodplains and wetland resilience.

One project implemented live willow spiling, staking, and brush backfilling which will stabilize eroding banks to establish long-term habitat buffers.

Runoff and water quality management was implemented by four projects through action such as erecting riparian fencing to exclude livestock, realigning ditches to divert rainwater from manure near protected sites, hay bay installation.

Finally, many projects carried out action to eradicate invasive non-native species, such as Himalayan balsam, through extensive volunteer efforts to revive native flora, while one installed a series of mink traps as part of a wider water vole recovery strategy.

The above actions were consistently rated with high confidence, and this review agrees they are effective in improving river habitat structure and ecological function and resilience.

For standing open water and canals, action that qualified as restoration was carried out by reversing artificial drainage networks to retain water on sites. This included blocking underground land drains and agricultural ditches.

For actions qualifying as creation, grantees undertook pond and scrape creation to establish a diverse network of open water habitats. Grantees excavated seasonal ponds, ephemeral pools, and varying-depth scrapes across modified grasslands, neutral pastures, and wet woodlands. They designed these water bodies with shallow margins to boost biodiversity, intentionally sited several outside active floodplains to prevent fish migration, and revived ancient 'ghost ponds' while installing fencing to exclude livestock. Some actions focused on wetland habitat diversification by introducing specialised flora and restructuring existing vegetation.

Some actions included seeding bare ground and pond edges with native aquatic mixes, wetland plugs, and wildflowers, while other actions translocated Sphagnum moss to newly dug scrapes.

The grantees' confidence levels were predominantly high with very few medium confidence levels expressed. The review concurs with this level of confidence as most actions will instantly establish permanent aquatic habitats and create diverse depth zones for wildlife, attracting amphibians, insects, and birds to the new habitat.

Action to Create, Restore or Manage Rivers and Lakes

A total of 15 projects completed habitat actions within river and lake habitats (Table 4.4. below).

- **Habitat breakdown:**
 - Actions were split almost equally between the broad habitats:
 - Rivers and streams: 154 hectares (51%)
 - Standing open water and canals: 146 hectares (49%)
- **Action types:**
 - The bulk of the work focused on management, with creation and restoration evenly divided:
 - Creation: 40 hectares (13%)
 - Restoration: 33 hectares (11%)
 - Management: 227 hectares (76%)
 - Rivers and streams actions:

- Created: 1 hectares (0.4% of habitat actions)
- Restored: 28 hectares (18% of habitat actions)
- Managed: 125 hectares (81% of habitat actions)
- Standing open water and canals actions:
 - Created: 39 hectares (27% of habitat actions)
 - Restored: 5 hectares (3% of habitat actions)
 - Managed: 146 hectares (70% of habitat actions)

Table 4.4 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	1	28	125	154	51%
Standing open water and canals	39	5	103	146	49%
Total	40	33	227	300	100%

Base: Spatial data (n=15 projects). Please note that due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

Perceived Project Impact on Rivers and Lakes

Projects delivering river, lake and riparian works were generally confident that their main planned works had been completed by the end of SSF. Staff consistently reflected that the main ecological value of this activity was expected to emerge over the next three to six years, and findings in this section should be understood in that context.

Staff most commonly described impact in terms of visible physical change to channels, banks, ponds, lakes and water movement, whilst remaining cautious about claiming full ecological recovery within the programme period. Across river and riparian projects, staff reported that activity had improved channel condition, reconnected rivers with adjacent habitat, opened up fish passages and improved the quality of habitat along watercourses. Staff frequently distinguished between immediate physical change and longer-term ecological response, noting that smaller freshwater features could show visible change more quickly than river systems.

‘Floodplain reconnection and restoration of fen habitat opened up about 5km of habitat for migratory fish. It will take some time for this to settle in, with up to 6 years for rivers. Wetland creation is quicker, we have had a lot of bird sightings, [of them] using the new features.’
Staff, Final interview

As discussed in the Process Evaluation, examples of physical connectivity improvements, including the Groundwork Greater Manchester Lees Brook restoration, were already strengthening habitat quality between sites by programme close. Other examples of connectivity improvements included eel passes, fish passes and weir removals intended to reduce barriers to species movement along watercourses.

Alongside condition changes, staff commonly reported early ecological signals of river and lake-based activity, including fish spawning on restored gravels and increased species use of re-naturalised channels. These were treated as encouraging early indicators.

‘Saw the spawning of trout on gravel that we put into the river. Can’t show perfect proof because you don’t know how nature will react over time but that was really positive.’ **Staff, Workshop**

‘Before it was a field and now, we have a whole channel with natural riverbanks and riverbeds. Will have to check next season to see if there’s fish. There are already more invertebrates compared to a control area.’ **Staff, Workshop**

Evidence from Sheffield City Council indicates that process-led restoration generated practical learning alongside physical change. Interventions such as leaky dams were monitored in wet conditions and refined iteratively, developing their understanding of what was effective on site and strengthening the basis for future restoration activity. This approach combined contractor-led works for larger interventions such as ponds, scrapes and larger leaky dams, with ranger and volunteer-led activity for smaller features and channel refinement. Several projects also used established methodologies to assess site condition, providing a clearer basis for judging future change.

‘All the river restoration has used a methodology called MoRPh Pro [...] All sites were assessed with that, and we will reassess how far it is moving up the categories’ **Staff, Final interview**

When reflecting on the impact of their project, staff also referenced improved water quality at their sites. Staff were aware, however, that attributing water quality improvements specifically to SSF activity would be difficult. In these cases, staff reported that they hoped river restoration, invasive non-native species management and catchment-scale activity would contribute to water quality improvements over time, whilst acknowledging that wider catchment pressures would continue to influence outcomes.

Several projects also reported that river and freshwater work has contributed to climate adaptation, particularly where works improved hydrological control or helped sites manage water differently. Staff reported that improved hydrological management was expected to make sites more resilient to future climate pressures, including low flows, water availability and storm damage, representing a meaningful longer-term contribution of SSF investment.

‘In the face of more and more extreme pressures from climate change, it would definitely be a huge benefit to these sites to be able to control hydrology a lot more and hopefully they’ll be a lot more robust.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

Overall, staff reported that SSF had made a meaningful contribution to river, lake and riparian habitats, with completed works improving channel condition, water movement and freshwater features. Staff were confident that the full ecological value of these works would continue to develop beyond the funding period.

4.1.3 Grassland, Heathland and Woodland

Ecological Review

For woodland habitats, 12 organisations carried out actions that fulfilled the habitat restoration and creation criteria.

10 of these organisations’ actions aimed to expand and diversify the landscape by planting hundreds of native trees, including oak, silver birch, hazel, and small-leaved lime. These efforts extended existing lowland mixed deciduous and wet woodland habitats, particularly in sensitive areas near Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). By strategically placing new trees, projects connected fragmented woodland parcels to improve ecological corridors across farms. Additionally, they established traditional orchards, diverse wood pastures, and pollinator plots, while utilising high-density planting pockets and heavy standard trees to offset necessary felling. The confidence in success was high and is supported by this review.

To restore native habitats, actions aimed at removing large volumes of non-native invasive conifers, Sitka spruce, larch, and dense rhododendron. This work opened up the woodland canopy, letting vital light reach the forest floor to encourage the regeneration of native broadleaved species. Teams thinned overgrown woodlands, cleared windblown trees, and replaced them with native understorey planting. The works were 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.

Some actions focused on managing agricultural impacts where projects ceased conventional, intensive farming to allow natural, process-led regeneration. To facilitate this transition, teams secured sites by erecting perimeter fencing and repairing broken boundary fences. They installed new water pipes and troughs to support the introduction of sustainable grazing systems. Finally, projects carefully

managed livestock pressure by excluding grazing in sensitive zones, and they protected new growth by using wire or post-and-rail guards. Upland Oak woodland restoration is an example of a habitat that benefited from these actions.

Actions that fell under management activities included the removal of invasive non-native species (INNS) such as Himalayan balsam, Japanese knotweed, cherry laurel, sycamore, and rhododendron, coppicing and selective felling and thinning. Where INNS removal was described by staff as being effectively managed, their 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 long term follow-up (like grazing) and landscape-scale action to ensure effectiveness.

Linear habitats such as hedgerows were expanded by planting hundreds of trees and shrub 'whips' along riparian corridors and newly fenced zones. Organisations also performed traditional hedge laying to manage existing, degraded hedgerows. Additionally, they planted dedicated wildflower buffer strips alongside new hedges and created 'pollinator plots' to provide immediate food and shelter for insects like bees and butterflies.

19 organisations carried out actions targeting grassland habitats. Where actions fell under grassland enhancement and restoration, grantees heavily focused on boosting botanical diversity in fields and meadows. Many shifted from mechanical mowing to traditional hand-scything, varied cutting heights, and scarified the soil to sow specialised wildflower mixes, yellow rattle, and acidic or calcareous indicator species. To lower excessive soil nutrients, some implemented cycles of hard vegetation cutting and removal, and spread green hay gathered from established, species-rich meadows. The reported confidence in these techniques ranged from medium to high which the review agrees with based on the effectiveness of the techniques used to mimic natural disturbance regimes while actively overcoming nutrient barriers.

Five organisations focused on controlling livestock to prevent overgrazing. Organisations erected boundary fencing to exclude sheep or cattle from action areas, like upland heaths, while introducing infrastructure like new water connections and troughs to enable highly targeted, extensive grazing. In some areas, specific livestock like ponies or pigs were introduced to naturally break up dominant bracken and create a varied grass sward. The grantees' confidence in outcome success was reported to be mostly high, with some reporting medium level confidence. The review would lean on the medium level confidence as grazing control can require constant review of stocking density and livestock species to address the changing requirements of the habitats in the face of seasonal and climatic variations.

In agricultural settings, organisations integrated habitats directly into food-production areas. Intensive farming was halted in certain zones, and some existing arable plots were specifically cultivated to stimulate and support rare plants waiting in the historical seedbank. The confidence provided by the grantees was medium and low. This review concurs with the medium level confidence as the actions immediately led

to stopping nutrient overloading, pesticide damage, and mechanical soil disturbance but can have a long-term transition phase.

19 organisations delivered actions that fall under management. Widespread scrub clearing and invasive scrub species was carried out. Staff and volunteers cleared extensive areas of encroaching bramble, gorse, hawthorn, and even-aged willow scrub that were expanding into valuable grasslands and peat bogs.

Action to Create, Restore or Manage Grassland, Heathland and Woodland

All 20 projects delivered a combined total of 3,684 hectares of habitat actions (Table 4.5 below).

- **Habitat breakdown:**
 - Over half of the actions completed occurred within woodland and forests:
 - Woodland and forest: 2,110 hectares (57%)
 - Grassland: 1,199 hectares (33%)
 - Heathland and shrub: 376 hectares (10%)
- **Action types:**
 - The bulk of the work focused on management, with creation and restoration evenly divided:
 - Creation: 505 hectares (14%)
 - Restoration: 593 hectares (16%)
 - Management: 2,587 hectares (70%)
 - Grassland actions:
 - 79 hectares (7%) were created. Neutral grassland led with 57 hectares, followed by calcareous grassland with 21 hectares. No projects reported creating acid grassland.
 - 199 hectares (17%) were restored. Neutral grassland accounted for 165 hectares, followed by calcareous (23 hectares) and acid grassland (11 hectares).
 - 921 hectares (77%) were managed. Neutral grassland dominated with 553 hectares, though all other grassland types exceeded 100 hectares of work.
 - Heathland and shrub actions:
 - 22 hectares (6%) were created. Hedgerows were the main target with 17 hectares (78%), followed by dense scrub (5 hectares, 21%) and dwarf shrub heath (0.2 hectares, 1%).
 - 29 hectares (8%) were restored. Dwarf shrub heath led with 23 hectares (81%), followed by dense scrub (5 hectares, 18%) and hedgerows (0.4 hectares, 1%).
 - 325 hectares (87%) managed. Dwarf shrub heath was predominant at 280 hectares (86%), followed by dense scrub (42 hectares, 13%) and hedgerows (4 hectares, 1%).
 - Woodland and forest actions:

- 405 hectares (19%) were created. Only broadleaved mixed and yew woodland were created
- 365 hectares (17%) were restored. Only broadleaved mixed and yew woodland were restored
- 1,340 hectares (64%) were managed. The vast majority (99.8%) of woodland and forest habitat managed were broadleaved mixed and yew woodland

Table 4.5 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
Acid grassland	-	11	144	154	4%
Calcareous grassland	21	23	104	148	4%
Modified grassland	1	-	120	121	3%
Neutral grassland	57	165	553	775	21%
Dense scrub	5	5	42	51	1%
Dwarf shrub heath	0.2	23	280	303	8%
Hedgerows	17	0.4	4	21	1%
Broadleaved mixed and yew woodland	405	365	1,337	2,107	57%
Coniferous woodland	-	-	3	3	0%
Total	505	593	2,587	3,684	100%

Base: Spatial data (n=20 projects). Does not include the 36 ha of unknown actions, or 0.2 ha of unknown habitat. Please note that due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

Perceived Project Impact on Grassland, Heathland and Woodland

Projects delivering grassland, heathland and woodland works were generally confident that the main planned habitat actions have been completed by programme close, with several projects reporting that they have exceeded original targets.

Staff frequently noted that grassland and heathland changes would become visible relatively quickly, particularly where grazing, disturbance or scrub clearance rapidly altered site conditions. In contrast, woodland recovery was expected to take considerably longer, particularly where projects involved conifer conversion, native woodland creation or temperate rainforest restoration.

‘Forestry work [can have an] initial negative look, but in 30 years [it] will be transformative. Nutrient stripping, from a visual point of view, [it doesn’t look great], but you’ve gone from arable wheat to grassland. It is important to separate the visual aspect and the biodiversity and habitat creation impact.’ **Staff, Workshop**

In heathland habitats, landowners at the New Forest reported sand lizards and tiger beetles using newly created sandy scrapes, suggesting that restored features were already being used by characteristic species. Project-level evaluation evidence from Cornwall Wildlife Trust reported heather colonisation and the presence of rare plants following heathland restoration, indicating that suitable conditions for heathland vegetation were beginning to re-establish.

In grassland habitats, project-level evaluation evidence from Wiltshire reported rare plants, including Annual Knawel and Round-leaved Fluellen, emerging from dormant seed banks once more favourable management conditions were restored. This suggests that some sites responded relatively quickly where seed banks remained viable.

In woodland habitats, the Wet Willow Wildlife project confirmed Willow Tits on several sites where they had not previously been recorded. Staff also described immediate structural changes including canopy opening, removal of diseased or invasive trees and improved wet woodland structure as early indicators of improving conditions. Across habitat types, staff from other projects reflected on the range of early signals they were seeing,

‘[There are] so many benefits, some of the work has only just been done so [there aren’t] brand new populations of habitats, but everything will have or has had an impact. Hedgerows, we won’t see [a] big impact on habitat for years. Reed beds, we saw quite instantly that there was more wildlife there. Wild meadows are now a sea of wildflowers, not just grassy fields. [We have] created habitats where they were just farmland.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

Beyond specific habitat-based activity, feedback from staff also suggests that capital investment funded through SSF is expected to support longer-term management of woodland, heathland and grassland habitats beyond the programme period.

‘Work through the project will contribute to an increase in biodiversity. This couldn't be measured in the project timescale however is anticipated to become more apparent as time passes and the work that was undertaken establishes. The equipment and infrastructure funded through the project will continue to provide benefit for many years to come, allowing for much improved management of sites. In the case of the robo flail, the time saving of using it for scrub management means the team has more time to cover sites that were previously neglected.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

Training delivered to local groups and residents was also expected to enable better management of sites beyond the funded period, including areas not directly covered by the project. This suggests that SSF's contribution to grassland, heathland and woodland habitats extended beyond the physical works delivered, building the local capacity needed to sustain management into the future. More detail on sustained activity and legacy can be found in [Section 4.5](#).

4.1.4 Wetland and Coastal

Ecological Review

For wetlands and coastal lagoons, a focus was placed on re-engineering wetland topography to combat erosion and support native wildlife. Organisations undertook reprofiling works along lagoon edges to establish protective banks, aiming to mitigate wave erosion and encourage the colonisation of saltmarsh vegetation. Within the saline lagoons, some actions aimed at deepening the water bodies, raising existing landmasses, and introducing artificial structures like Tern rafts. One organisation created four dedicated gravel islands. Another action aimed at creating a new tidal inlet and a dredged main tidal feed. The extracted material from these excavations was strategically repurposed to reinforce adjacent floodbanks against erosion.

To protect local avifauna, such as nesting Terns and Black-headed Gulls, some actions included installing dedicated boardwalks designed to channel foot traffic and reduce ground disturbance. Practical visual barriers were upgraded, such as replacing the defensive screening along the causeway leading into a lagoon. To balance light levels and succession, organisations removed up to 50% of overhanging willow canopies, cleared invasive rhododendron, and selectively culled encroaching reed mace.

Seven organisations actively managed and expanded reedbed and lagoon systems to benefit targeted wading birds and wildfowl. Teams constructed sediment ‘silt fingers’ and ditches within lakes to extend reedbed margins, translocating Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) rhizomes to these new zones under the protection of temporary anti-grazing bird fencing. Additionally, they removed even-aged willow scrub to encourage reed expansion and constructed four new gravelled islands within lagoons to provide secure nesting sites for Terns and Black-headed Gulls. The confidence levels were predominantly high, which this review agreed with, subject to long term management being in place to manage water and silt flow levels.

Action to Create, Restore or Manage Wetland and Coastal Habitats

A total of 15 projects completed habitat actions within wetland and coastal habitats (Table 4.6 below).

- **Habitat breakdown:**
 - Most actions were completed in wetland habitats:
 - Marine inlets and transitional waters: 110 hectares (19%)
 - Wetlands: 469 hectares (81%)
- **Action types:**
 - The majority of actions were management-focused:
 - Creation: 106 hectares (18%)
 - Restoration: 60 hectares (10%)
 - Management: 412 hectares (71%)
 - Marine inlets and transitional waters actions:
 - 110 hectares (100%) were managed. All reported activity was restricted to a single sub-habitat: littoral sediment.
 - Wetland actions:
 - 106 hectares (23%) were created. Mostly comprised fen, marsh and swamp (102 hectares), alongside 5 hectares of bog creation.
 - 60 hectares (13%) were restored. Restoration favoured bog habitats (44 hectares) over fen, marsh and swamp (16 hectares).
 - 302 hectares (64%) were managed. Actions were heavily concentrated within fen, marsh and swamp habitats (300 hectares).

Table 4.6 Area of all SSF-funded actions on habitats in wetland and coastal habitats

Broad Habitat	Creation activities (ha)	Restoration activities (ha)	Management activities (ha)	Total area (ha)
Littoral Sediment	-	-	110	110
Bog	5	44	1	50
Fen marsh and swamp	102	16	300	418
Total	106	60	412	579

Base: Spatial data (n=15 projects). Does not include the 61 ha of unknown action type, or the 4 ha of unknown habitat. Please note that due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

Perceived Project Impact on Wetland and Coastal Habitats

Projects delivering wetland and coastal works were generally confident that the main planned habitat actions were completed by the end of the programme. Staff frequently reflected that wetland and coastal interventions produced visible changes relatively quickly compared with some other habitat types, with scrapes, ponds,

lagoons, islands, ditches and backwaters altering the physical structure of sites within the delivery period. Early signs of species use were already evident across a number of projects by programme close, though staff recognised that the full ecological value of the works would depend on future water levels, vegetation growth, management and monitoring.

‘We’re not immediately seeing eels colonise the wetlands, but that’s really to be expected. We do immediately see plants colonise, we see dragonflies colonise, we see birds coming to use them which is lovely to see. But in terms of monitoring outputs, we’re not really seeing those yet.’ **Staff, Final Workshop**

For wetland habitats, staff most commonly reported impacts relating to water management, habitat variety and early species response. WWT reported the first confirmed great crested newt breeding in a decade at Bridgwater Bay following pond restoration, whilst in Wiltshire, Lapwing and Little Ringed Plover bred successfully at newly created wetlands within months of works being completed. Project-level evaluation evidence from Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust reported increases of between 30% and 177% in aquatic invertebrate numbers within a year of wetland restoration at some sites, providing a more direct indication that restored wetland processes have begun to support ecological change.

Staff also reported that some wetland works were beginning to influence how water moved or was retained on sites. Project-level evaluation evidence from Somerset Wildlife Trust indicates that dipwell monitoring (process of measuring the depth of the water table) at Honeygar showed water tables rising by an average of 15cm a year since 2022. Whilst this rise pre-dates SSF, the programme contributed the third phase of physical rewetting works at the site and enabled the installation of automatic dipwell data loggers and a web platform to process water table data, strengthening the monitoring infrastructure needed to ensure the rise continues in a controlled and evidence-led way. At Shire Brook, wetland features were observed holding water during heavy rain in September 2025, which staff linked to reduced downstream flood risk. These examples show early functional change beyond visible habitat creation.

Staff most commonly described impact in relation to improved breeding and feeding conditions, better water control and greater resilience across coastal and floodplain grazing marsh and saline lagoon habitats. Project-level evaluation evidence from RSPB indicates substantial increases in Redshank and Lapwing breeding pairs as a result of improved habitat quality and predator control across sites including the Hoo Peninsula and Dungeness.

Coastal projects also reported early signs of species use. WWT’s work at Steart Marshes enhanced saline lagoon habitat through basin deepening, island raising and new tidal inlets, alongside new scrapes and pond restoration, with project-level evaluation evidence reporting rapid use of these features including rare visitors such

as Glossy Ibis and Least Sandpiper, with the latter recorded for the first time at the reserve. Project-level evaluation evidence from the National Trust's Freshwater Renaissance project similarly reported rapid ecological response following wetland and freshwater restoration, including reconnected floodplains, restored ponds and improved river and stream habitats. Reconnected floodplains quickly became hotspots for wetland birds including Curlew, Redshank and Kingfisher, and in North Devon six dragonfly species were recorded using restored ponds within the first week of works completing.

Staff consistently linked wetland and coastal work to longer-term climate adaptation, with restored habitat mosaics described as creating landscapes better able to respond to sea-level rise, coastal erosion and changing water conditions. This was particularly evident where projects had improved water control or created wetter, more varied habitats across sites.

'The sites will be more resilient to climate change based on the actions taken. The foot drains and scrapes need to fill up with water and then the vegetation comes back in, then it's working. It will [take] about a year for that vegetation to grow back and the water features to fill.' **Staff, Workshop**

Across wetland and coastal habitats, staff reported that their SSF project has made a meaningful contribution to habitat restoration at a scale and pace that would not have been achievable without dedicated funding. The programme enabled grantees to create or restore wetter, more varied and better-managed habitats, with early signs of species use, water retention and hydrological change already visible across several projects. The longer-term ecological value of this work is expected to grow as vegetation establishes, water features develop and sites become more resilient to future climate pressures. For wetland habitats, this will depend on whether suitable water levels and follow-up management can be maintained. For coastal habitats, it will also depend on how dynamic coastal systems respond to tides, storms and wider climate pressures over time.

4.2 Skills and Capacity Building

This section explores staff, apprentice and trainee destinations at project close, and grantee reflections on the lasting outcomes of skills and capacity building activity. This includes the effect on organisational capability and partnerships, the legacy of monitoring and surveying work, and the extent to which partnerships are expected to continue beyond the funded period.

4.2.1 Jobs

Indirect jobs

Through the project costs spent on goods and services, it is estimated that the SSF has supported an additional 202.2 full-time indirect jobs.

Cost data have been grouped based on areas of expenditure and been attributed a two-digit Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) code relevant to these activities. Using data from the ONS Annual Business Survey (2023), a 'turnover per job' metric has been estimated using the number of people employed divided by the total turnover in these sectors in England. From this, it is possible to estimate the number of indirect jobs supported by the programme. It should be noted that there may be additional indirect employment effects at a local level due to continued indirect spending within local supply chains, which is dependent on the locations of suppliers and contractors used by projects.

Job destinations

In addition to supporting the creation and retention of jobs in the sector during the funding period, the number of jobs retained in the environmental sector is a contribution to the long-term resilience of the sector. Through the final survey, 17 of the 20 projects provided information on the destinations of staff after their SSF-funded roles ended, where destination refers to whether staff remained in the same role, moved to another role within the environmental sector, or left the sector entirely. Destination data was available for 110 of the 197 jobs supported through the programme.

In total, surveyed organisations suggested that 73% of jobs that were newly created for their project have been retained in the environmental sector, either continuing within funded organisations or moving to another environmental role. This includes apprenticeships, and accounts for 54 job roles out of 74 newly created roles for which destination data were given. Scaling this proportion to the 102 roles which were created through the programme in the monitoring information (which also include apprentices), it is estimated that SSF has created 95 jobs which have been retained in the environmental sector in some capacity.

However, it should be noted that the relatively small number of newly created permanent roles (9 roles total) may suggest that SSF supported short-term delivery capacity within funded organisations more than sustained job creation. Overall, the programme has played a valuable role in maintaining sector capacity and supporting individuals to build experience within the environmental workforce.

Perceived Project Impact

Staff described apprenticeships, traineeships and entry-level posts as important routes into the environmental sector, particularly where roles combined practical site experience with training, supervision and exposure to different parts of project delivery. In several projects, trainees and apprentices gained training working with specific equipment, survey experience, volunteer management skills, ecological knowledge and project management experience.

'Our trainee did boat, chainsaw and tractor training, so they now have a role as an assistant reserve manager.' **Staff, Final Interview**

‘Trainee roles were for graduates, opportunities to get into the career and [the opportunities] helped them to cut their teeth as entry level professionals [...] They were embedded across multiple teams, they were so closely involved in the work and given a lot of responsibility.’
Staff, Final Interview

As noted in the Process Evaluation, the fixed-term nature of contracts limited staff continuity across the programme, a pressure that was felt particularly during the final year. Project-level evaluations indicate that staff recruited on fixed-term contracts often left before project completion to secure permanent roles elsewhere. Whilst this is common in fixed-term projects and reflects demand for environmental skills, it reduced continuity, limited handover time and placed additional pressure on remaining staff during the final year.

The impact of SSF-supported roles was most evident where organisations were able to retain staff or convert short-term roles into longer-term posts. In one project, two SSF trainees were made permanent, which was seen as valuable both for the individuals and for the wider team. In another, a trainee was retained to ensure that their green finance skills developed through the project were retained within the organisation. Staff also linked investment in training to staff retention more broadly, reflecting that it helped people working on SSF projects feel valued.

‘The SSF trainees have been made permanent so that’s obviously a big impact for them, not only for themselves, but also equipping the reserves team with that capacity.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

‘It has really worked to empower people. It makes people feel you are invested in them and that really mattered.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

Overall, where roles were retained or converted to permanent posts, SSF strengthened organisational capacity and helped embed skills beyond the funding period. Where posts ended or staff moved on, the programme still contributed to skills and experience within the wider environmental sector.

4.2.2 Surveying and monitoring capacity

Staff commonly reported that one of the most tangible outcomes of SSF was their organisation's improved ability to survey and monitor their sites. In several projects, this changed who could collect data, what could be monitored and how that evidence could be used in future site management.

The upskilling of volunteers in monitoring methods, discussed in [Section 3.3](#), was identified as a lasting impact by staff. This included Riverfly monitoring, water vole monitoring, Willow Tit surveys, butterfly monitoring, vegetation surveys and species identification. In some projects, volunteers became more able to support monitoring independently, though staff also recognised that this still required coordination and

quality assurance. Several projects also described Citizen Science becoming a more integrated part of delivery over time, shifting from something treated as a contracted output towards a more embedded part of engagement and skills activity.

SSF also enabled projects to use monitoring technology that had not previously been available to them. Staff referenced dipwells, camera traps, pollinator counters, eDNA testing and acoustic monitoring. In several cases, these tools reduced the need for staff to be present at every point of data collection and helped establish baselines that future monitoring could build from.

‘The key legacy that this will bring especially organisational will be the dipwells in establishing that baseline, the dipwells, the data loggers, the camera traps, all of which have now enabled our organisation to start monitoring the water levels, the species that are abundant and the species that aren't even there.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

‘The training is increasing capacity for the reserves, that's definitely one of the greatest things about this project... one of the biggest things that has increased our organisational capacity is through the data loggers and dipwells that we've installed all throughout our reserves, which can automatically monitor water levels.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

In several projects, monitoring evidence generated through SSF was also beginning to feed into wider planning beyond individual project sites. Baseline UKHab maps from one project were submitted as part of the evidence base for a Local Nature Recovery Strategy, illustrating how monitoring data could contribute to landscape-scale planning as well as site-level management.

4.2.3 Partnerships

One of the notable impacts of SSF was giving organisations experience of working together at greater scale and under delivery pressure. Staff frequently reflected that partnership working has changed what organisations know about each other, how they work together and what they can do in future.

Staff most commonly described partnership impact in relation to the sharing of expertise, including habitat management, engagement, surveying, landowner relationships, volunteer coordination and technical delivery, which enabled projects to take on a wider range of activity than any one organisation could have delivered alone. In one interview, staff described the value of working through a partnership where different organisations brought river, woodland, canal and community engagement expertise, reflecting that the project built confidence in a shared way of working that could be used again:

‘Workforce development and training delivered through the project has been very effective. By bringing staff and rangers [together], we have strengthened relationships across partners, not just at a management level but at ranger and volunteer level as well. People now know each other better and feel more confident working across organisations.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

Staff also suggested that partnership working helped organisations understand each other's constraints and working practices better, including differences in decision-making processes, procurement rules, land management responsibilities and community relationships. Staff reflected that this understanding improved over time and made later delivery more effective, suggesting that SSF generated practical partnership learning that could support future projects.

‘Feels like with the partners we’ve built a lot of trust, lots of opportunities for shared learning. We’ve been able to support on comms and engagement. They’ve really come together as a coherent whole.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

Several projects also reported that by the end of the programme, partners were already discussing further work, future bids or continued site management. Project-level evaluation evidence from Lancashire Wildlife Trust and The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) indicates that both organisations were jointly planning future bids based on their shared SSF experience. In Sheffield, the Council was identified by partners as a key future delivery partner, with further joint working already under discussion. In Somerset, the work was described as ‘unifying’, bringing together groups including YMCA residents, local farmers and conservation organisations who might not otherwise have collaborated.

Partnerships were more likely to continue where organisations had retained the staff time and coordination capacity needed to keep them active post-SSF. Where staff had changed or coordination responsibilities were spread across several posts, partnership working supported programme delivery but was anticipated to be difficult to sustain post-programme.

4.2.4 Organisational resilience

SSF contributed to organisational resilience where organisations retained staff, embedded new skills, improved internal systems and gained confidence to deliver similar or larger-scale work in future. Staff most commonly described resilience in terms of what organisations were left with at the programme's close, including the people, knowledge, relationships, equipment and data that could continue to support nature recovery work beyond the funding period.

Staff typically linked organisational resilience to retained skills and experience. Where project staff were intending to remain within their organisations post-SSF, this was seen as significant because delivery knowledge, site relationships and technical learning would not be lost. This was particularly relevant where projects have involved complex habitat works, new monitoring approaches or new forms of partnership working, with staff describing SSF as having built organisational confidence through project delivery.

‘I’ve done chainsaw training, quadbike training, brushcutter training, training to monitor biodiversity etc and I’ve been able to use so much of it on the project. [It] feel[s] like it was an investment in me that now will be an investment into the sites in the long-term as I’m now [in a] permanent role.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

SSF has strengthened organisational resilience by improving how some organisations plan and evidence future work. Staff reported that developing monitoring baselines, site management plans and follow-on delivery plans through SSF has given organisations a clearer basis for future bids, maintenance activity and land management decisions (more detail on this is provided in [Section 4.4.1](#)). SSF also appears to have built organisations’ confidence in handling larger or more complex projects. In some cases, where projects had staff with less experience project managing, there was also considerable learning around procurement, contractor management and partnership coordination.

‘For us, the project’s dispersed the knowledge, buy in, for staff and also other organisations locally. [We] restructured [the] team around this project, we tested our systems which has made them more resilient and developed watertight procurement processes.’ **Staff, Final Workshop**

4.3 Connecting People with Nature

This section explores grantees’ perceptions of the benefits project activity has had on volunteers and the general public including health, wellbeing and social benefits, and engagement with new audiences. It also provides detail on grantee perceptions on the impact of new infrastructure and the benefits this had for visitors and local communities.

Across most projects, staff indicated that SSF has had a positive impact on people's connection with nature. Nature connection is understood as individuals’ relationship with nature, encompassing a wide range of physiological, emotional and behavioural responses. A strong connection to nature supports individual wellbeing, pro-environmental behaviours and longer-term environmental stewardship. Please note

that there is not one singular best practice method to measure nature connection, with the appropriate measurement depending on the intervention, audience and context. As would be expected, the depth of nature connection achieved varied both across and within projects, depending on how and how frequently people engaged.

Staff most commonly reported benefits for regular volunteers, school groups and people involved through targeted partner organisations. These benefits included greater confidence using sites, social contact, enjoyment of local green spaces, practical skills and a growing sense of care for places where people had contributed to visible change.

4.3.1 Benefits to Volunteers and the General Public

Staff frequently reported that SSF has had a positive impact on volunteers and members of the public who took part in connecting people with nature activity. Staff drew a clear distinction between one-off activity and more regular involvement and the benefits each type of activity could produce.

As described in [Section 3.4](#), one-off activities were valued for raising awareness and giving people a first positive experience of local nature, whilst regular involvement was more consistently linked to personal and social benefits. Regular involvement gave people routine, a practical role and opportunities for social engagement, with confidence, practical skills, new relationships and a growing sense of responsibility for local sites frequently cited as outcomes of sustained participation.

‘We established this bank of regular volunteers that come in all weathers, some have been almost every week and they have ownership of it and pride in it. It means a lot to them and it's a connection to the site.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

‘Friendships formed when volunteers have been volunteering long-term. [They gained] a greater understanding of what's happening in the natural world around them... seeing people open up and relax. [There is] pride that comes along with being involved in something ongoing, seeing how their work is impacting the land, returning next season and seeing how the land has changed.’ **Staff, Final Workshop**

Staff also reported perceived mental health and wellbeing benefits. Some activities were explicitly designed around wellbeing, such as RSPB's Nature Prescriptions social prescribing activity at Dungeness, where one attendee at a carers' group event described it as the first time they had been out of the house in two years, noting it was ‘wonderful for my wellbeing.’ Others appeared to generate wellbeing benefits through practical involvement and repeated participation.

‘We had one person crying happy tears at one of our nature connection events [...]. It's had a positive impact on helping people make friends. It's been great for people's mental health and feeling very calm.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

Several projects also reported that participants developed pride in the sites they were working on, with engagement moving beyond attendance or awareness-raising towards a sense of ownership and care for local nature. One interviewee described how visible activity had helped build broader public support for longer-term site management.

There were also positive impacts for children and young people. Staff reported that children responded well to practical, interactive activity, particularly where they could explore, use equipment, take part in surveys or see species close up. School activities also helped shift children's attention towards local wildlife, particularly in urban areas. However, staff were frequently cautious about claiming long-term impact from one-off school sessions, whilst still recognising the value of giving children experiences they may not otherwise have had.

‘Schools are unknown quantities, we don't know until years later until children take action to protect nature themselves or study conservation. But short-term they have the opportunity to engage with nature which they wouldn't have had before.’ **Staff, Final Workshop**

Beyond individual benefits, staff also reflected on the longer-term significance of sustained public engagement for site stewardship. Where individuals had developed ongoing relationships with project sites, staff expected this to translate into continued care, monitoring and advocacy beyond the funding period. In several projects, regular volunteers and community groups were already taking on more responsibility for sites, suggesting that sustained engagement through SSF has acted as a catalyst for longer-term local stewardship.

4.3.2 Engaging New Audiences

Several projects indicated that SSF has helped them reach people who were new to nature, new to conservation activity or new to the project sites. Several projects reached people who were new to their sites as volunteers or visitors. This includes carers, refugees and asylum-seeker groups, disabled people, people experiencing social isolation, young people not in education, employment or training, and groups with limited previous contact with nature. Staff most frequently attributed this to working through trusted organisations, including schools, youth organisations, accessibility groups, refugee and asylum-seeker support organisations, mental health charities, social prescribers and community groups.

As described in [Section 3.4.2](#), inclusive engagement was most effective where projects adapted both the activity and the support around it, with people more confident attending as part of a group, through an organisation they trusted or in a setting they already knew. WWT reported that tactile activities such as willow weaving worked well for visually impaired participants. RSPB's work at Dungeness with refugee, asylum-seeker and accessibility groups illustrates how supported visits helped people engage with a site they may not otherwise have accessed.

Schools and young people were an important part of this work, particularly where projects were operating in areas with more limited access to nature. Staff reported that children and young people responded well to getting involved with practical activities such as bioblitzes, pond creation, wildflower planting and wildlife gardening. Project-level evaluations provide examples of positive school engagement, including Newcastle City Council's work with children from areas of high deprivation and Cornwall Wildlife Trust's work with Red Moor School, a specialist school for children who face barriers to learning in mainstream education.

4.3.3 Infrastructure

Infrastructure had a positive impact where it changed what people could realistically do on site. Staff linked paths, boardwalks, hides, signage, interpretation, drainage, bridge repairs and access improvements to whether groups could get onto sites, stay long enough to take part in activity, and access areas that had previously been difficult or unsuitable for visits:

'[There have been] massive improvements to accessibility across the entire site. There's been drains put in, they've repaired bridges and improved the overall maintenance of the site [...] it has meant that people who maybe don't use the site can now use the site, which has been really good.' **Staff, Final Interview**

Staff most frequently linked infrastructure benefits to schools, volunteers, local visitors and people with accessibility needs, with the perceived impact clearest where infrastructure removed a specific barrier to site use. In one project, staff were able to point to direct evidence of use of new accessible infrastructure,

'The hide in [site] has been well used, [we] put a door counter in and it's averaged at least 1,099 people use it each month. It's accessible too so a wheelchair can go in, it has a ramp and wide door.' **Staff, Final Interview**

Staff also commonly reported that new and enhanced infrastructure also helped some projects improve how visitors understood habitat change. Interpretation boards, sculpture trails, murals, virtual tours and 'before-and-after' walks gave staff

ways to show what has changed and why. This was particularly important where habitat works could otherwise appear disruptive or unclear to visitors. Staff at Ribble Rivers Trust described how ‘before-and-after’ walks helped participants see landscape change linked to fish passes and culvert removals.

4.4 Sustainability and Legacy

This section explores project perceptions of sustainability and legacy beyond the funding period. It examines the extent to which projects are expected to continue after funding ends, and the key lessons grantees have drawn from their experience of SSF delivery.

Most grantees have considered how activity could be sustained beyond SSF, but the level of certainty varies across the portfolio. Several grantees noted that the SSF five-year post-delivery maintenance provision gives them a useful basis for planning beyond capital delivery, and in several projects core habitat management, monitoring, volunteer activity and partnership working are expected to continue through site management plans, existing reserve management, landowner agreements, volunteer networks or wider organisational programmes. However, continuation of the full range of SSF-funded activity is unlikely without further funding beyond the maintenance provision, particularly where SSF had funded dedicated staff, engagement activity, specialist monitoring or capital works that require ongoing investment.

4.4.1 Continuation of Activity

Most grantees confirmed that habitat works would be maintained through existing or new management plans. In some cases, grantees described habitat interventions as becoming part of ‘business-as-usual’ activity, particularly where works had taken place on land owned or managed by the grantee. As noted in [Section 4.1](#), the full ecological value of restoration or creation activity will become visible over time, and the maintenance provision provides projects with a mechanism to support planning beyond the point of capital delivery.

Several grantees also used SSF funding to formalise longer-term management frameworks. Groundwork Greater Manchester have initiated thirty-year woodland management plans to ensure that habitat benefits, including carbon sequestration and light-level dynamics, reach their full potential as trees mature. Additionally, Durham County Council (and Durham Heritage Coast Partnership) have used their SSF project to inform their next Heritage Coast Management Plan for 2026, ensuring that habitat condition baselines established through the project will continue to shape future habitat management.

In other projects, sustainability also depended on sustained partnerships. Where landowners, farmers, ‘friends of’ groups, local authorities or community organisations had been closely involved, staff were more confident that some activity would continue, particularly where SSF has strengthened existing partner relationships or given partners the confidence, skills or infrastructure to take activity forward.

Some grantees have also been able to secure continuity through other funding streams, including additional Heritage Fund bids, local authority support, FiPL, Countryside Stewardship, Environment Agency funding and other agri-environment schemes. Several grantees described SSF as a ‘springboard’ for larger, landscape-scale funding such as Defra’s Landscape Recovery scheme and the Heritage Fund’s Landscape Connections. For example, Nature Rich Miterdale secured additional funding to connect habitats across Eskdale, Miterdale and Wasdale, the National Trust used their SSF project as a foundation to connect habitats across the wider Lake District, and Cornwall Wildlife Trust’s Par Catchment project is the foundation for the Heritage Fund supported Tor to Shore project, a five-year intervention building on fencing and grazing structures installed through SSF.

Funding uncertainty was perceived as one of the main risks to sustainability. Staff frequently reported that organisations had the ambition, partnerships and delivery knowledge to continue, but lacked access to reliable long-term funding. This was particularly important for connecting people with nature activity, ongoing monitoring, invasive species control, grazing management and work on third-party land.

‘Everyone I speak to who’s a stakeholder of any kind is really keen to do more work [...] We’ve got the capacity between all of the partners and between the partnership and the wider network. We’ve got the drive to do it. It is literally just funding.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

4.4.2 Legacy

Grantees most commonly described the legacy of their projects as the result of completed physical habitat activity. Staff reported that they expect ecological benefits to continue developing over several years as vegetation establishes, species respond and management systems become embedded, as described in [Section 4.1](#).

Established and improved relationships with landowners, farmers, local authorities, community groups and delivery partners were also frequently identified as a lasting legacy, particularly where projects had been delivered on third-party land.

‘The genuine habitat restoration at scale [...] I think the other key legacy is those ongoing relationships with all of those landowners. [...] We will maintain and grow those relationships and things will spring from them.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

The development of monitoring data and evidence was another substantive legacy. As described in [Section 4.2.2](#), several projects established baselines that had not previously existed. For example, the Somerset Wildlife Trust’s project strengthened soil and peat baselines through a University of Bristol PhD project that will continue to track microbial and nutrient changes resulting from rewetting work. The Woodland

Trust's rainforest restoration project also used the Rapid Rainforest Assessment tool, developed by Plantlife prior to SSF, to establish baseline monitoring across project sites, providing a standardised approach that will continue to inform future management.

Community engagement and stewardship were also key aspects of project legacy. Staff typically reported that where local people were taking on more responsibility for sites through volunteering, Citizen Science and community advocacy, they expected this to continue beyond the funded period. In some projects, stewardship roles were expected to be central to sustaining activity where organisations could not maintain the same level of staff input after SSF.

'Volunteering engagement, they are the future of [the site] and they will continue the work that has been started. What they've achieved has been amazing.' **Staff, Final Interview**

However, staff emphasised that, in most cases, volunteer and community stewardship could not replace funded staff capacity, particularly where sites required technical management, volunteer coordination or specialist ecological work.

At programme level, staff described SSF as demonstrating that partnership-based delivery can achieve meaningful change within a short funding period. Staff also valued the fact that SSF gave organisations a way to connect local action to a national nature recovery effort.

'What I've heard from all the workshops is that working together makes a massive difference. I think it's really nice to see big impacts across the country and across different habitats and different themes.' **Staff, Final Interview**

However, staff noted that their limited oversight of other SSF projects during delivery made it difficult to reflect on the wider programme legacy, with many only becoming aware of what others had delivered through the evaluation workshops. Some staff felt that more structured cross-project learning during delivery could have helped grantees share approaches and understand their contribution to the wider national programme.

'[It is] nice to see that other people are doing similar things and you're not just isolated, you're part of a bigger picture.' **Staff, Final Interview**

5 Value for Money

Overall, the evidence indicates that the Species Survival Fund delivered good value for money, with particularly strong performance in terms of effectiveness and efficiency, supported by robust delivery and additional, longer-term benefits.

- Total project delivery cost amounted to £28.3 million, with procurement processes, administration costs, funding levels and significant match/in-kind contributions demonstrating sound resource use and cost control.
- The 17 assessed projects undertook habitat activities across 3,822 ha, at a cost per hectare of £2,686. Projects also held 1,308 events at a cost per event of £2,774. It should be noted that value for money data was requested from all 20 projects, though three projects did not provide the detail required for assessment.
- Outcomes are largely additional, with most activity unlikely to have occurred at the same scale without SSF funding.
- Whilst equity was not a core focus across all elements of delivery, projects reached diverse and underrepresented groups, supported by inclusive delivery models and broad geographic spread.

5.1 Approach

The SSF value for money assessment combines quantitative impacts and qualitative evidence to assess the full range of values the programme delivered. This analysis draws on monitoring information, cost data and qualitative feedback from reflective workshops and final interviews.

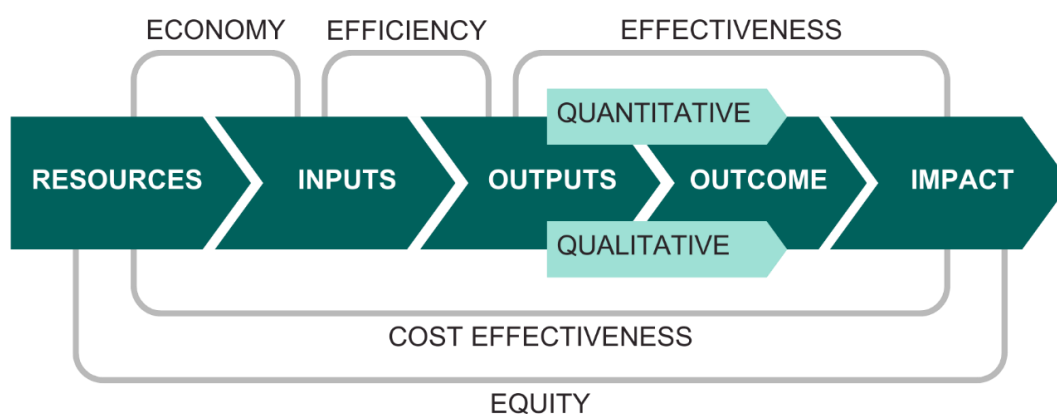
The approach has built upon the 'Four E's' approach to value for money assessment (as used by the [National Audit Office](#)). This was extended to five criteria with the inclusion of 'cost-effectiveness', and generated results across the following:

- **Economy:** (a more basic measure) the cost of resources used or required (inputs) i.e. how much is being spent/spending the least possible.
- **Efficiency:** (a middle measure that can be compared to other projects) the relationship between the activities delivered and the resources used i.e. spending well.
- **Effectiveness:** (a stronger measure) the extent to which funded activities lead to intended environmental, social and economic outcomes i.e. spending wisely.
- **Equity:** (a cross-cutting measure) the extent to which benefits are available to and reach all people that they are intended to; i.e. spending fairly.
- **Cost-effectiveness:** (a holistic measure) comparing the outcome or impact to the total cost; i.e. was it worth it?

These criteria provide a structured way to examine whether SSF resources were secured and used appropriately, converted efficiently into outputs, delivered intended outcomes, reached the people they were intended to reach, and represented good overall value when assessed holistically. Summary assessments against each Value

for Money dimension follow the criteria set out in Annex C.3. The graph below illustrates the conceptual framework.

Figure 5.1: 'Four E's' framework



The terminology used is set out below:

- **Total grant** refers to the amount of funding awarded to projects by the Heritage Fund.
- **Proportion spend** refers to the percentage of the total grant spent by projects at the end of the project.
- **Total spend** refers to the amount of funding spent by projects out of the total grant.
- **Match funding** refers to any funding sourced by projects aside from the SSF grant. Match funding includes both **cash match funding** and **in-kind contributions** that encompasses non-cash contributions and the valuation of volunteer time.
- **Total cost** refers to the total amount of funding put towards each project (including the total grant and any match funding).
- **Actual cost** is calculated using the total spend plus match funding. Since projects have provided details of match funding secured at project end, it has been assumed that this match fund has all been spent in full.

5.2 Economy

This section assesses whether SSF resources were secured and deployed at appropriate cost whilst maintaining required quality. It examines expenditure against expectations, use of match funding, volunteer inputs and in-kind contributions, the effectiveness of procurement and award processes, and project perceptions of whether funding levels and timelines supported delivery within budget. This section addresses the following questions:

- To what extent did the SSF project procurement and award processes used ensure delivery of interventions to the required quality and value for money?
- How well were target timelines for the launch and delivery of SSF projects met and did this support delivery within budget?

- To what extent did the delivery of SSF projects meet initial expenditure expectations?

Economy Assessment: medium. Procurement processes were robust, delivery was effective, and projects secured match funding from a range of sources including substantial in-kind contributions. A small number of projects faced challenges in fully deploying allocated funding within the delivery period. This reflects delivery pressures described in [Section 3.1](#), including recruitment challenges, consents delays, weather conditions and contractor availability, rather than poor financial planning.

5.2.1 Project spend

SSF supported 20 projects to create, restore and manage habitats and to help halt the decline of species across England. These projects were supported through grants totalling more than £25 million.

As of June 2026, the Heritage Fund had paid £23.3 million to projects (92% of total allocation). Combined with match funding of £5.1 million, the actual programme cost was £28.3 million. Table 5.1 below summarises programme expenditure.

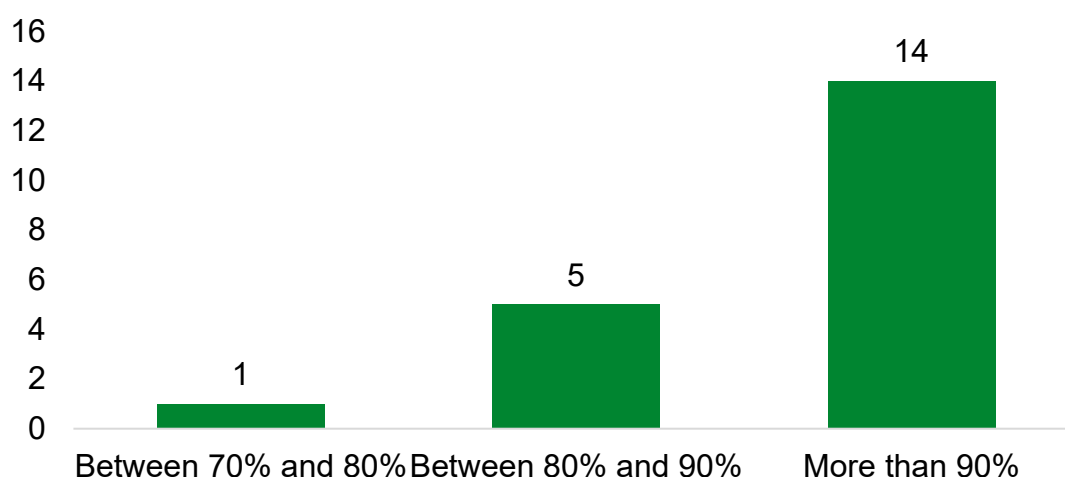
Table 5.1: Project spend

Funding	Total (£)
Grant funding awarded	£25,370,500
Payments made to date	£23,257,539
% of grant paid to date	92%
Match funding secured	£5,062,423
Actual programme cost	£28,319,963

Base: Project cost information and value for money survey (n=17). Where projects did not respond to the value for money survey, the original application match funding amount and source has been used.

Five projects spent all allocated grant funding (100%), and 14 projects (70% of the portfolio) spent more than 90% of allocated funds, suggesting that costs had generally been estimated accurately while retaining sufficient flexibility to respond to unforeseen circumstances (Figure 5.2 below). Only one project spent less than 80% of the total grant allocated to them. It is important to note that applicants were expected to include a contingency of around 10% within their budgets to manage unforeseen costs and delivery risks, giving projects flexibility to respond to changing circumstances without necessarily drawing down their full grant allocation.

Figure 5.2: Number of project by porportion spend



Base: Project cost information.

The distribution of spend reflects the practical challenge of accurately costing and phasing delivery in the context of market volatility and the delivery challenges set out in [Section 3.1](#). A relatively short application window may also have encouraged conservative cost estimates in some cases. Where projects did not draw down their full grant allocation, this does not indicate poor value for money or wasteful spending. Rather, it reflects the difficulty of accurately forecasting costs for complex environmental delivery in uncertain conditions.

‘We didn’t know how much the whole thing was going to cost until quite late in the process. At the end had underspend and contingency money was released so [...] a huge chunk was spent in the last quarter.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

5.2.2 Match Funding

Whilst there was no minimum requirement for match funding contribution, projects were encouraged to source at least 5% cash match funding of total costs. As illustrated by Table 5.2, at the point of project application, 83% of project costs were covered by SSF grant funding, with the remaining 17% match-funded by the individual projects. Within this 17% match funding, 14% is cash match funding and 3% is in-kind contributions.

Table 5.2: Disaggregated total project cost at application

Cost type	Amount (£)	% of total cost
Grant amount	£25,370,500	83%
Application match funding amount	£5,088,936	17%
Total cost amount	£30,459,436	100%

Base: Project cost information and project-level data summaries.

Match funding changed during delivery as projects secured additional funding or lost initially planned sources. Analysis of value for money survey responses (17 projects) shows a net reduction of £10,463 in match funding over the programme, representing -0.2% of the original match funding amount. However, total match funding remained broadly stable at application levels, and the percentage contribution increased slightly from 17% to 18% due to reductions in grant spend rather than increases in match funding.

Table 5.3: Disaggregated total project cost at programme end

Cost type	Amount (£)	% of actual cost
Grant spend	£23,257,539	82%
Actual match funding amount	£5,062,423	18%
Actual cost amount	£28,319,963	100%

Base: Project cost information and value for money survey (n=17). Where projects did not respond to the value for money survey, the original application match funding amount and source has been used.

At project level, match funding change varied, with:

- Three projects increasing their match funding secured
- 10 projects staying the same
- Four projects decreasing their match funding secured, and,
- For three projects it is unknown how their match funding changed.

Projects secured match funding from diverse sources, reducing dependence on any single funder and strengthening financial resilience. Public funding accounted for 31% of match funding (10 projects), private donations accounted for 28% (15 projects), in-kind support accounted for 13% (11 projects), and other sources accounted for 27% (14 projects). Most organisations (70%) relied on multiple sources, and 55% received funding from public sector sources. This diversity demonstrates that projects successfully leveraged SSF investment to attract wider support, multiplying the economic value of the programme.

Table 5.4: Match funding by source

Source of match funding	No. of projects	Match funding amount	% of match funding
Public	10	£1,563,222	31%
Private	15	£1,433,235	28%
In-kind support total	11	£675,550	13%
Other	14	£1,390,415	27%
Total match funding	20	£5,062,423	100%

Base: Project cost information and project-level data summaries. Please note that this table includes In-kind support which does not count towards the 5% cash match target. Please note that percentage figures are rounded and may not add up to 100%.

Table 5.5 shows that projects drew on a range of cash match funding sources, which reduced reliance on SSF grant funding alone. Private donations were the most widely used source, supporting 15 projects (75%), indicating that many projects were able to secure private sector contributions. Trust and foundation funding provided the largest single share of cash match funding (18%), but this was concentrated in three projects. Overall, most projects combined multiple funding sources, which helped spread financial risk and supported delivery within available budgets.

Table 5.5: Cash match funding by sub-type

Source of cash match funding	Cash match funding sub-type	No. of projects	Cash match funding amount	% of cash match funding
Public	Central government	4	£573,426	13%
Public	Local authority	7	£303,156	7%
Public	Other public sector	7	£686,641	16%
Private	Private donation - Trusts/Charities/ Foundations	15	£810,191	18%
Private	Private donations - corporate	4	£364,874	8%
Private	Private donation - Individual	4	£258,170	6%
Other	Own reserves	12	£629,844	14%
Other	Other Fundraising	7	£317,817	7%
Other	Commercial/business	8	£442,754	10%
Total cash match	-	20	£4,382,368	100%

Base: Project cost information and project-level data summaries. Please note that percentage figures are rounded and may not add up to 100%.

All projects achieved match funding above 5% of actual project costs when measured at programme end. Two projects secured match funding exceeding one third of their actual costs. Analysis of project match funding indicates that projects met economy expectations by securing planned resources at appropriate cost and diversifying funding sources to reduce risk.

5.2.3 In-Kind Contributions

Projects secured in-kind contributions beyond SSF and cash match funding, likely reducing overall programme costs and demonstrating effective use of available resources. Volunteer time was the most common form of in-kind contribution, with 14 projects reporting volunteer involvement in survey responses. Projects engaged 13,097 volunteers across the programme, of whom 3,891 (30%) were first-time volunteers for the delivery organisation.

At least eight projects reported additional unbudgeted staff time contributed to delivery. This totalled at least 1,240 hours and included finance, graphic design, administrative support and strategic leadership skills. Three organisations used equipment or premises not included in project budgets.

The scale of volunteer time, unbudgeted staff input and use of existing equipment and premises indicates that SSF funding was supplemented by substantial in-kind resources. This reduced overall costs and demonstrates that projects mobilised additional resources beyond those originally funded, increasing overall programme value for money.

5.2.4 Procurement and Delivery

Several project leads expressed high confidence that SSF procurement and award processes supported quality and value for money. Projects reported that procurement processes enabled delivery of interventions to the required quality whilst supporting cost-effective use of resources. Projects valued the flexibility to prioritise quality over lowest cost, which enabled specification of high-quality inputs essential to achieving long-term environmental outcomes. Examples included bespoke seed mixes and specialist contractors with proven habitat delivery experience. Projects emphasised that this supported long-term environmental benefits and represented good value for money when assessed against outcomes rather than solely unit cost.

Projects were required to obtain three competitive quotes for procurement above £10,000 and full tenders for procurement over £50,000. Many projects also applied robust internal procurement controls, including competitive tendering thresholds, peer review of expenditure, and established organisational policies, which were seen as effective in assuring appropriate costs while allowing quality considerations to take precedence over lowest price.

‘SSF requirements were in line with our own policy. It was fair and kept us vigilant.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

The programme allowed projects flexibility to prioritise quality rather than lowest cost. This enabled projects to specify high-quality inputs where essential, including bespoke seed mixes and specialist contractors with proven habitat delivery experience. Projects emphasised that this supported long-term environmental benefits and represented good value for money when assessed against outcomes rather than solely unit cost.

‘It was nice to know we didn’t have to go for the cheapest contracts. There was definitely quality over quantity in that respect.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

Projects used procurement flexibly to manage costs whilst maintaining delivery quality. In practice, this meant reserving contractors for specialist or higher-risk tasks, such as complex habitat works, whilst using staff and volunteers for lower-risk or labour-intensive activity. This approach allowed projects to extend delivery across additional sites without increasing overall costs and retain control over quality standards.

Several projects also reduced costs through adjustments to specifications once delivery was underway, for example by narrowing contractor inputs to essential works only. Where savings were generated, projects reported redirecting these resources to additional activity rather than reducing scope. Good working relationships with contractors further supported this approach, with some grantees reporting that they were able to secure in-kind contributions or informal efficiencies that enabled SSF funding to be focused on materials or expertise critical to long-term outcomes.

Procurement requirements and thresholds were consistently cited as a greater administrative burden than many grantees had anticipated. Competitive quoting and documentation requirements took staff time and, in some cases, slowed early delivery. However, project leads generally recognised these as a necessary part of managing public funding transparently and accountably.

Grantees frequently emphasised that procurement requirements supported fair competition and made trade-offs between cost and quality more explicit. Where early confusion arose, particularly around cumulative thresholds in partnership projects, Heritage Fund Grant-in-Aid Manager support and clarification improved grantees’ understanding and confidence. By the latter stages of delivery, most grantees reported that procurement processes were clear, proportionate and compatible with effective financial management.

Constraints in contractor availability, particularly for specialist habitat works, limited competition in some locations and required careful planning. In these cases, grantees balanced value for money considerations with the need for appropriate skills, local knowledge and timely delivery. Heritage Fund Grant-in-Aid Manager

advice supported projects in navigating these constraints without compromising procurement integrity or delivery quality.

5.3 Efficiency

This section assesses how effectively SSF resources were converted into planned outputs and activities within available budgets. It examines whether projects delivered expected volumes and quality of outputs, how projects maximised outcomes given budget allocations, and whether outputs were delivered at reasonable cost compared with other programmes. This section addresses three key questions:

- To what extent did the SSF projects deliver the outputs initially expected and within the expected budget?
- How did the SSF projects maximise their outcomes given the budget allocation?
- Were outputs delivered at a reasonable cost, and how do those costs compare across activities or to other programmes?

Value for Money Assessment: high. Projects delivered strong output performance and demonstrated effective use of resources. Whilst unit costs were variable and higher for some outputs, these are likely to reflect the programme's complexity and emphasis on capacity building, landscape-scale complexity and integration of multiple outcomes rather than inefficiency in delivery.

5.3.1 Delivery

Most projects reported in final interviews that they met or exceeded their contracted targets, indicating that SSF funding was generally used efficiently to deliver intended outputs. Delivery was particularly strong in connecting people with nature, aligning activity with local plans, and incorporating species monitoring, where the majority of projects reported meeting or exceeding agreed targets.

For habitat-related outcomes, half of projects (10) reported exceeding targets for creating joined-up space for nature, with a further seven reporting that targets were met. Only two projects reported that targets were mostly achieved, and one reported partially meeting their targets.

Similarly, most projects delivering nature-based solutions for climate adaptation and green jobs or apprenticeships reported meeting or exceeding expectations, indicating that planned activities were largely delivered within available resources. Fewer projects reported only partial achievement, and no projects reported minimal achievement across any activity area, suggesting delivery shortfall was limited.⁵

A few projects reported that time, rather than funding, constrained efficient delivery. Where delivery timescales limited the ability to deploy available resources, this sometimes resulted in underspend and reduced the volume of activity delivered.

⁵ Projects were asked to assess the extent to which they achieved targets on a five-point scale: minimally achieved, partially achieved, mostly achieved, met, or exceeded.

However, projects also highlighted that the flexibility built into the SSF programme enabled them to adapt delivery in response to site conditions, seasonal constraints and ecological evidence. This supports the conclusion that, for programmes of this type, flexible delivery arrangements are essential. Where longer delivery periods are not feasible, maintaining at least the level of flexibility offered through SSF is critical to enabling efficient and effective project delivery.

Other projects demonstrated efficient delivery through combinations of high-quality inputs and flexible delivery approaches. For example, some projects invested in higher-cost materials to ensure quality, while offsetting these costs through strong local relationships that reduced contractor time and delivery costs. This approach enabled delivery of higher-quality interventions without increasing overall expenditure, illustrating how adaptive delivery models and partnership working supported efficient resource use.

Overall, projects successfully converted funding into planned activities across a wide range of themes, with relatively little evidence of under-delivery against expectations. This supports an assessment of efficient use of programme resources.

5.3.2 Unit-cost analysis

The final project costs used for the unit-cost analysis combine data from projects' application data, data on final project spend, and survey data relating to the proportions of costs spent on each activity.

Calculating unit costs provides a systematic approach to assess the relationship between costs and outputs, helping to determine whether activities represent good value for money and providing benchmarks for future programmes. However, unit costs should be interpreted in context. Efficiency should be assessed against the delivery of multiple interdependent outcomes and building of long-term capacity, rather than purely minimising cost per unit of output.

In line with HM Treasury's [Green Book](#) and [Magenta Book](#) guidance, unit cost analysis is most appropriate and rigorous where costs can be associated with a singular main output or outcome. When applying this to SSF, additional consideration must be given to the range of activities and outcomes for the programme. As such, this analysis includes two types of unit-cost analysis:

- Comparing the unit costs of groups of projects which have delivered activity across similar habitat types
- Associating cost with delivering individual outcomes where these have been widely delivered across the portfolio of projects, such as jobs supported and trees planted.

The financial data used for the unit-cost analysis include information from the value for money survey, project costs and project expenditure. Where project cost data is used, this includes the actual cost multiplied by the proportion of costs spent on the relevant activity, as provided by projects through the value for money survey.

Therefore, some unit-costs are only possible for those projects that have responded

to the survey (17 projects) and others for those where final expenditure data was available (19 projects).

The key outcomes used to calculate unit costs cover habitat action, employment outcomes and connecting people with nature activity. The relevant outputs and unit costs are set out in Table 5.6 below.

Table 5.6: Summary of unit costs across all outcomes

Type of activity	Projects included	Total costs	Total unit	Cost per unit	Unit
Habitat activity	17	£10,268,343	3,822 ha	£2,686	per hectare
Employment	19	£6,493,872	132	£49,383	per job FTE
Events	17	£3,628,315	1,308	£2,774	per event
People	17	£3,628,315	35,463	£102	per person attending an event
Tree planting	11	£801,334	72,064	£11.12	per tree planted

Base: Monitoring information, value for money survey, cost and expenditure data.

Habitat Action

All 17 projects that provided data on value for money survey have been included in the unit cost analysis related to habitat action, which compared the area over which SSF-funded habitat action has taken place (in hectares) with the allocation of resources to habitat creation, restoration and management activities.

Table 5.7: Summary of unit costs across habitat types

Habitat type	No. of projects	Area of activity (ha)	Total project cost	Total habitat activity cost	Unit cost per total hectare (conservation costs)
Grassland	4	670	£5,480,917	£2,125,703	£3,171
Woodland	2	659	£2,977,399	£1,007,252	£1,528
Grassland/ Marine	2	484	£3,286,356	£1,406,780	£2,904
Grassland/ Woodland	1	483	£1,545,148	£618,059	£1,279
Grassland/ Wetland	1	315	£715,400	£286,160	£907
Heathland/ Woodland	1	313	£1,298,967	£649,484	£2,075
Woodland/ Cropland	1	77	£748,582	£336,862	£4,349
Woodland/ Urban	1	100	£866,314	£303,210	£3,024
Mosaic	4	719	£5,759,674	£3,534,833	£4,917
Total	17	3,822	£22,678,757	£10,268,343	£2,686

Base: Monitoring information, value for money survey, and cost data. Habitat types are defined based on the proportional distribution of activity within each project. A single habitat type is assigned where one habitat accounts for more than 70% of activity; otherwise, projects are classified as mixed habitat types (e.g. Grassland/Woodland) or as ‘Mosaic’ where activity is distributed across multiple habitats.

Across all habitat types, the 17 projects with complete data delivered 3,822 hectares of habitat creation, restoration and management, at a cost of £10.27 million, equivalent to **£2,686 per hectare**. Unit costs varied markedly between habitat types, ranging from £907 per hectare for Grassland/Wetland to £4,917 per hectare for Mosaic habitats. This suggests that efficiency varied by habitat context, with more complex or mixed habitats tending to require higher levels of resource per hectare. However, several categories are based on a single project, so differences should be interpreted cautiously.

Limited comparator evidence is available, as habitat conservation programmes do not routinely publish unit cost data. One relevant comparator is the [Green Recovery Challenge Fund](#) (2020-2023), a previous Defra programme managed by the Heritage Fund which supported nature recovery and community engagement. The GRCF evaluation reported conservation-cost unit costs of **£848 per hectare** for meadow and grassland projects and **£832 per hectare** for woodland projects (2025 prices). On this basis, SSF unit costs appear higher than those reported by GRCF for comparable broad habitat categories.

Other comparator sources suggest that SSF costs are more closely aligned with wider habitat creation benchmarks.

Costings prepared for the Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP), drawing on national habitat creation and restoration benchmarks, report average habitat creation costs of **£1,686 per hectare** for grassland habitats, **£1,584 per hectare** for woodland habitats and £1,212 per hectare for wetland habitats. SSF's woodland unit cost of £1,528 per hectare is broadly consistent with the woodland benchmark, while unit costs for other habitat groupings are generally higher.

However it should be noted that habitat action costs vary significantly depending on site characteristics, habitat condition, intervention type, land management requirements and project objectives. The benchmarks therefore provide useful context, but do not constitute a direct assessment of SSF value for money.

Connecting People with Nature

All 17 projects that provided data on value for money provided the resources associated with connecting people with nature, ranging from 3% to 30% of total resources used.

These projects held a total of 1,308 events, engaging 35,463 people, with total engagement costs of £3.63m. As such, these projects have a cost per event of £2,774 and a cost per person engaged of £102.

15 projects organised events a total of 326 events with schools and young people, with an estimated cost per participant of £106, slightly above the programme average. This likely reflects the higher upfront resource requirements associated with this type of engagement, as projects reported that working with schools often required repeated outreach and relationship-building before delivery could be established.

These unit costs are not directly comparable to other similar programmes. Whilst the **Green Recovery Challenge Fund** (2020-2023) delivered connecting people to nature outcomes, the unit-cost analysis was carried out on a subset of five projects focused on young people. The differences in outcomes, delivery context and the changes in costs and wages between the two programmes mean a robust direct comparison cannot be made.

Employment Outcomes

The number of jobs supported is a common metric applicable to expenditure data across all projects. This includes jobs created, existing jobs supported and apprenticeships. Caution should be taken when comparing with programmes with a core focus on employment support.

For the 19 projects where expenditure data was available, £6.5 million was spent on staff costs, supporting 132 FTE jobs. The total cost per FTE job was therefore £49,383.

This unit cost is higher than that reported for some comparable programmes. For example, the Green Recovery Challenge Fund Round 2 reported an average cost of £25,230 per FTE. This difference is likely to reflect the stronger focus within SSF on habitat creation, restoration and management, which required a consistent level of

specialist conservation expertise across projects. Whilst the Green Recovery Challenge Fund included conservation activity, it did not require this focus to the same extent, and projects could place greater emphasis on other themes such as people engagement. Employment outcomes within SSF should therefore be understood as a secondary benefit of investment primarily directed towards environmental delivery.

Tree Planting

In total, eleven of the 17 survey respondents associated specific costs with tree planting, allocating between 1% and 15% of resources to the activity. Tree planting included a wide range of tree types (saplings, whips, plug plants) and was carried out by volunteers, contractors, school groups and the public at engagement events.

Whilst tree planting was not a core outcome for SSF, it emerged as a more prominent delivery activity than originally anticipated, making it possible to assess its cost effectiveness across the programme. Overall, these eleven projects attributed £801,334 to planting 72,064 trees, equating to £11.12 per tree.

This unit cost is comparable to other similar programmes; the unit costs associated with the Green Recovery Challenge Fund for tree planting are as follows:

- £6 per tree for projects where tree planting was not the main outcome/focus of habitat activity
- £13 per tree for the project where tree planting was the core focus with other habitat activities as secondary outcomes.

5.4 Effectiveness

This section assesses the extent to which SSF funded activities led to intended environmental, social and economic outcomes. It reviews environmental, social, organisational and economic outcomes, including habitat and species benefits, impacts on people, organisational capacity and alignment with local priorities. It also considers employment effects and wider economic impacts. This section addresses the following questions:

- To what extent did the SSF projects deliver the outcomes initially expected and within the expected budget?
- How did the SSF projects achieve the maximum number of outcomes given the budget?
- To what extent did SSF funding generate additional outcomes and benefits beyond what would have occurred without the programme?

Value for Money Assessment: high. Projects delivered intended outcomes with strong evidence of longer-term benefits through capacity building, monitoring capability, and alignment with local priorities. Whilst many outcomes will continue to develop beyond the funding period and additionality is based on perception rather than counterfactual evidence, the programme demonstrates a high level of effectiveness in generating meaningful and largely additional change.

5.4.1 Delivery of outcomes

Most projects reported that they delivered the outcomes originally expected, although many noted that the full environmental benefits will take time to become apparent. This reflects the long-term nature of habitat and species recovery, where impacts continue to mature beyond the formal delivery period. Within this context, delivery within budget was generally achieved, and the expectation of longer-term outcomes was seen as appropriate rather than a shortfall in value for money.

‘The impact won’t be visible very quickly, but over time that will massively change the diversity and the strength of the woodland in terms of its resilience environmentally.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

Projects described having a strong focus on maximising outcomes by investing in assets, skills and approaches that would continue to generate benefits beyond the life of the funding. This included funding equipment and infrastructure that improved long-term site management, and building the capacity of staff, volunteers and local groups to sustain and extend activity. These approaches suggest that SSF funding supported the delivery of immediate outputs and helped to generate enduring value and additional benefits over time.

‘The equipment and infrastructure funded through the project will continue to provide benefit for many years, allowing for much improved management of sites.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

‘Training up of local groups and residents means they are able to manage their sites better, including areas not in the project in future years.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

Strengthening species and habitat monitoring and surveying capacity was a key objective of SSF, and projects reported that the programme supported meaningful progress against this aim. Beyond delivering monitoring activity, SSF enabled investment in skills, equipment, and volunteering that increased organisations’ ability to collect and use ecological data over time. This enhanced capability is expected to support ongoing site management, learning and decision-making beyond the funding period.

Grantee interview feedback also indicates that outcomes were generally well aligned with the specific environmental and social contexts of delivery areas. Several organisations noted that their work was informed by, and contributed to, emerging Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS), with habitat and species priorities directly shaping site selection and intervention design.

Alignment with local skills strategies was less consistent, reflecting variable awareness and integration of skills planning. Whilst several projects delivered meaningful contributions to green skills development, including apprenticeships, traineeships and volunteer upskilling, these were more often driven by organisational need and opportunity than by deliberate alignment with formal local skills plans. These findings suggest that whilst outcomes were relevant to local delivery landscapes, there remains scope to strengthen strategic alignment. Overall, these gaps did not undermine delivery but reflect the challenges of operating within an evolving local policy landscape.

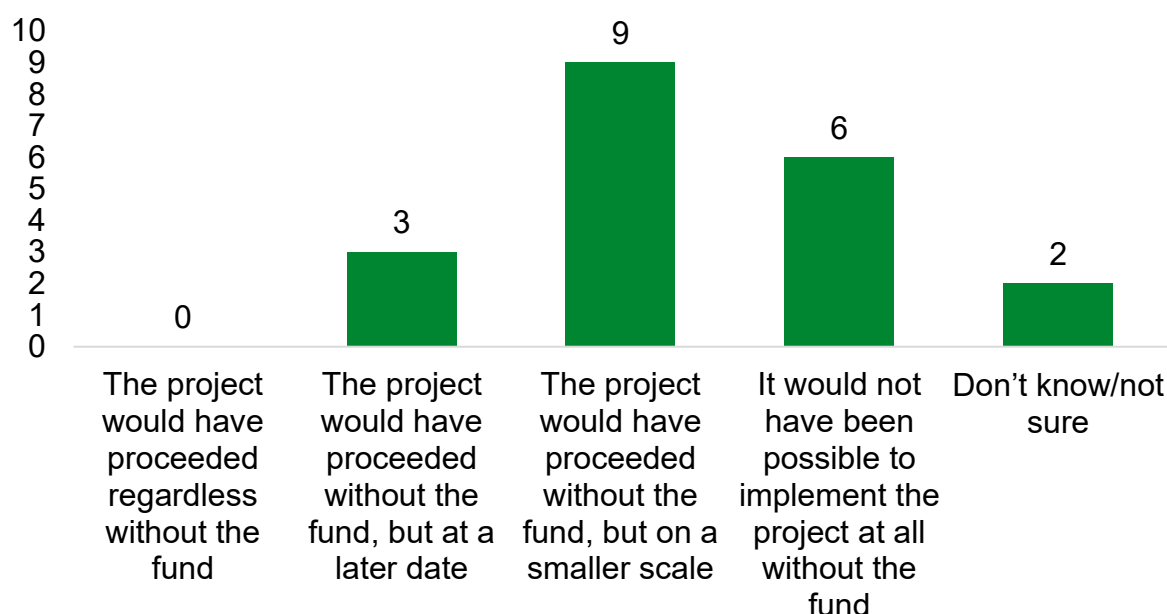
‘Because we have already delivered visible activity on the ground, we now have a much stronger case when talking to the public...and other stakeholders.’ **Staff, Final Interview**

5.4.2 Additionality of Funding

It is important to consider the additionality of SSF when assessing whether it represents good value for money. Additionality is the concept of determining whether the funding has generated outcomes or benefits that are additional to what would have occurred in the absence of that investment. As no control group was available, additionality is based on project perceptions of project activity or expected outcomes had they not received funding.

Figure 5.3 below indicates that SSF funding made a clear difference to delivery across the portfolio. It shows that six projects would not have been possible at all without SSF support. For most others, projects reported that activity would have proceeded, but at reduced scale or at a later point in time. No projects reported that their activity would have gone ahead as planned without SSF funding.

Figure 5.3: If you had not secured the Species Survival Fund support, what would have happened to your project?



Base: Staff interview (n=20).

As highlighted in [Section 3.1](#), final interviews indicate that SSF filled a gap in available funding for landscape-scale, partnership-led conservation at a time when other funding sources were constrained. Several projects noted that SSF provided the financial certainty needed to recruit staff, commission contractors and commit to multi-year delivery, which would not have been achievable through smaller or shorter-term funding.

5.4.3 Wider economic and employment outcomes

Evidence suggests that SSF generated wider employment benefits beyond direct delivery, supporting additional jobs through supply-chain spending and contributing to longer-term sector resilience. Based on analysis of project expenditure, it is estimated that SSF supported around 202.2 additional full-time equivalent indirect jobs⁶, indicating that programme investment stimulated economic activity in related sectors alongside direct project delivery.

In addition to indirect employment effects, SSF appears to have made a meaningful contribution to sustaining employment in the environmental sector. Survey evidence indicates that around 73% of newly created roles and apprenticeships were retained within the sector, either within funded organisations or through progression into other environmental roles. When scaled to programme monitoring data, this suggests that approximately 95 jobs created through SSF have been retained in the environmental sector, supporting longer-term workforce capacity and strengthening the sector beyond SSF's lifetime.

⁶ See Annex C.2 for methodology

In addition to the quantified employment effects, two projects distributed a relatively small proportion of SSF funding, around £160,000, through community grants, which generated wider economic and social benefits not captured within programme monitoring data. Evidence from the two projects suggests these grants acted as a lever to stimulate locally-led activity, strengthened community networks and built capacity for future engagement and delivery, creating indirect benefits that extended beyond the immediate funding period. Whilst these impacts are not reflected in formal employment or output measures, they contributed to broader value creation.

‘If I think about how we might have delivered this without the community grant fund, I think we'd have had a very different outcome because the community grant fund has been our real way into those conversations with communities.’ **Project Staff Interview**

5.5 Equity

This section considers the extent to which SSF projects delivered activity fairly by assessing whether services were accessible to, and reached, their intended audiences. It seeks to answer the following questions:

- Have the SSF projects effectively delivered activity to their target audiences?
- To what extent were the outcomes distributed fairly across different groups, places and types of communities?

Value for Money Assessment: medium. Evidence suggests the programme reached a range of audiences and supported access for underrepresented groups, with a range of inclusive delivery approaches and evidence of broadly even geographical distribution of funding. However, equity was not a primary focus of programme design and therefore not consistently embedded across delivery.

5.5.1 Delivery to target audiences

Overall, staff reported that SSF projects were largely successful in delivering activity to their target audiences, including groups who typically face barriers to accessing nature. Projects described effective engagement with a wide range of underrepresented groups, including young people not in education or employment, carers, refugees, people experiencing trauma or addiction, people with disabilities, and residents in deprived or rural areas who may face barriers to participating in organised nature-based activities. In many cases, this engagement represented participants' first meaningful interaction with nature or with environmental organisations.

Projects highlighted a range of approaches that supported access and inclusion, including community grants, partnerships with trusted local organisations, targeted youth programmes, school engagement, and delivery models that brought activity to communities rather than requiring people to travel to sites. While some projects

noted ongoing challenges, such as limited data collection on diversity, transport barriers, or difficulties engaging some ethnic minority groups, the overall evidence suggests that SSF delivery supported more equitable participation across a broad range of communities.

Staff feedback also indicates that infrastructure improvements supported more equitable access to sites and activities for those who faced physical or practical barriers to engagement. Projects reported that investments such as improved paths, boardwalks, gates, drainage, accessible hides, parking and interpretation helped create safer, more inclusive access for a wider range of visitors. Although infrastructure was not a major focus for all projects and some outcomes are still emerging, evidence suggests that these improvements enabled participation by groups who may not otherwise have been able to visit or engage.

At a programme level, the geographical distribution of SSF funding further supports an equitable delivery approach. No single region received more than 20 per cent of total SSF grant funding, indicating a relatively even spread of investment across England. The North West and South West had the highest number of funded projects, with four projects in each region, whilst other regions hosted between one and three projects.

Whilst most projects delivered activity within a single region, three national organisations delivered activity across multiple regions, extending the reach of SSF investment and enabling benefits to be shared more widely. Funding patterns also varied by project size. For example, the East Midlands hosted some of the largest projects by total grant value (£5.3m total), whilst the South West was characterised by a greater number of smaller projects (£3.2 total or £0.8m per project). This mix suggests that SSF funding supported both large-scale, multi-region delivery and more localised interventions, contributing to fair access to funding and activity across different places.

Table 5.8: Regional spread of funded projects

Region	No. of projects	% of total SSF projects	Total grant award	% of total SSF grant
North West	4	20%	£ 4,931,618	19%
South West	4	20%	£ 3,181,871	13%
South East	3	15%	£ 5,089,685	20%
North East	3	15%	£ 2,411,962	10%
East Midlands	3	15%	£ 5,269,318	21%
Yorkshire and The Humber	2	10%	£ 2,762,206	11%
East of England	1	5%	£ 1,723,840	7%
Totals	20	-	£ 25,370,500	-

Base: Project cost information. Please note that percentage figures are rounded and may not add up to 100%.

Analysis of roles by area deprivation provides insight into how employment outcomes are distributed. Among roles with known locations (186 roles), 6% were in the most deprived areas in England (the bottom 20%), compared with 26% in the least deprived areas (the top 20%). The majority (59%) were located in areas with mid-level deprivation (4th - 6th decile), indicating that employment outcomes were more concentrated in moderately deprived to more affluent areas. However, this analysis is partly based on the location of employing organisations rather than where employees live and therefore may not fully reflect the distribution of benefits to individuals.

In contrast, the distribution of events shows a stronger concentration in more deprived areas. Of all reported events with precise location information (1,723 events), 40% were delivered in the 30% most deprived areas in England, compared with only 7% in the 20% least deprived areas.

5.6 Cost-effectiveness

This section assesses the cost-effectiveness of SSF by bringing together evidence on outcomes, impacts and total costs to consider whether the programme represents good overall value for money. It focuses on whether the outcomes achieved justify the level of investment, how SSF compares with alternative ways of delivering similar outcomes, and what lessons can support more cost-effective delivery in future. This section seeks to answer the following questions:

- How does the cost of delivering outcomes through SSF compare with alternative approaches the organisations might have used to achieve similar results?
- To what extent did the activities delivered provide good overall value, considering both the outcomes achieved and the investment of time and funding?
- What lessons from the SSF projects can inform more cost-effective delivery of outcomes in future?

The value for money assessment across Economy (medium), Efficiency (high), Effectiveness (high) and Equity (medium) indicates that SSF delivered strong outcomes and efficient use of resources, with some limitations in fully deploying allocated funding and in evidencing equity outcomes systematically.

Unit costs for some activities, notably employment and habitat delivery, were higher than comparable programmes such as the Green Recovery Challenge Fund. This reflects the more explicit focus within SSF on habitat creation, restoration and management, which required a consistent level of specialist conservation expertise across projects. Three quarters (75%) of roles created as part of SSF were classified as mid- or senior-level (57% and 18% respectively), reflecting investment in organisational capacity rather than short-term job creation. Where costs were higher than comparator programmes, this reflects SSF's integrated approach, landscape-scale complexity and delivery of multiple outcomes rather than inefficiency.

The scale and diversity of outcomes achieved, combined with wider benefits including strengthened partnerships, organisational capacity, match funding leverage and co-benefits such as flood risk reduction and improved air quality, demonstrate that SSF delivered high overall value from the investment. Project responses indicate strong additionality, with most reporting that activity would not have occurred, or would have proceeded at reduced scale or later, without SSF funding.

6 Conclusions and Recommendations

This section provides an overview of key findings from this report and recommendations relevant for future programmes.

Contribution to national biodiversity commitments

SSF delivered 4,800 hectares of habitat action across England. This represents a considerable contribution to national biodiversity commitments.

Delivery progress and challenges

Grantees largely reported that they had successfully met their project aims and delivered against their targets, with a wide range of effective practice evident across all three themes of benefits to nature, skills and capacity building, and connecting people with nature.

Many grantees found year one challenging due to delays to permissions, consents, recruitment and adverse weather. For most, this was remedied in year two, once plans were in place, monitoring and survey activity was embedded, trust with local communities had been built and more favourable weather enabled projects to catch up on delayed activity. This enabled grantees to accelerate habitat delivery and embed nature connection activity in the final year, though the compressed delivery window placed additional pressure on project teams throughout.

Benefits to nature

SSF delivered habitat action across a wide range of habitat types and intervention approaches, with most projects reporting that they had achieved what they set out to do. Early signs of greater ecological activity were reported across all habitat types by programme close, though staff frequently expected the full ecological value of works to emerge over the next three to five years. Habitat connectivity was delivered through physical links and stepping-stone habitats across landscapes, with staff describing SSF as enabling landscape-scale thinking that had not previously been possible within their funded work.

Skills and capacity building

The capacity to develop surveying and monitoring, and in particular to develop a level of evidence for their sites that had not previously existed, was identified as one of the most significant outcomes of the programme. Grantees reported being able to measure progress in ways that had not been feasible before SSF, with new baselines, tools and methods established across the portfolio. In some cases, this evidence is already feeding into Local Nature Recovery Strategies and being used to explore new funding streams including green finance routes that had not previously been open to organisations.

Consistently identified as a key enabler across the programme, partnership working supported organisations to improve habitat connectivity, engage and retain

audiences and volunteers they had not previously reached, and deliver training and learning opportunities that strengthened inter-organisational relationships beyond the funded period.

Connecting people with nature

Projects organised over 1,700 events and engaged more than 50,000 participants. Projects were most successful at reaching new audiences where they worked through trusted intermediaries and existing community groups, which reduced barriers to first-time participation. The depth of impact varied depending on how frequently people engaged. One-off activity was effective in introducing new audiences to nature and raising awareness, particularly for people with limited prior access to green spaces. Grantees most consistently reported positive outcomes associated with repeated participation, including increased confidence, improved wellbeing, practical skills and a growing sense of responsibility for local sites. Several projects reported that sustained engagement has begun to translate into longer-term environmental stewardship, with volunteers and community groups already taking on more responsibility for sites beyond the funded period.

Sustainability and legacy

SSF has strengthened the conditions for sustainability across the portfolio, though the level of certainty varies. Where work has been integrated into existing management structures, supported by landowners or aligned with follow-on funding, continuation is more likely. Several projects have used SSF as a springboard for larger landscape-scale funding, and the monitoring evidence, management plans and strengthened partnerships established through the programme leave grantees better placed to pursue future funding and continue activity beyond the funded period.

SSF provided an early opportunity to apply the statutory habitat target definitions in a programme context at scale. These definitions were not published by Natural England until after project awards had already been made, meaning that neither fund design nor project planning could fully account for what activity would ultimately count towards the target. The approach developed through this evaluation is expected to inform future programme reporting, and the experience of applying these definitions across a diverse range of habitat types and delivery contexts for Species Survival Fund has supported Defra and Natural England in refining how creation, restoration and management are defined and evidenced. The input from SSF has also led to Natural England and Defra updating key guidance documents to support understanding moving forward.

Whilst grantees were aware of the wider SSF programme, most had limited visibility of what other projects were delivering during the funded period, with many only becoming aware of this through the evaluation workshops.

6.1 Recommendations

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

1. **Longer timescales:** Delays to statutory consents, landowner agreements and recruitment, alongside the impact of adverse weather, were common causes of compressed delivery across SSF projects. Future environmental initiatives should extend delivery timeframes to a minimum of three years and include a clearly defined planning phase before delivery begins. This is particularly important for projects that are ambitious or delivered at landscape scale. More time at the beginning of programmes would allow grantees to secure permissions, complete baseline surveys, establish procurement arrangements and build landowner and community relationships before delivery begins. Future programme design should also take into account the ecological constraints of habitat delivery, recognising that many activities are seasonally dependent and that delays early in a programme can have a disproportionate impact on what can be achieved within the remaining delivery period.
2. **Funder flexibility:** Where longer delivery periods are not possible, funders could provide flexibility to allow projects to adapt in response to changing circumstances. The Heritage Fund's approach within SSF, including its willingness to support reasonable variations and change requests, was identified by grantees as essential to achieving outputs within the programme timeframe.
3. **Baseline monitoring:** The integration of species and habitat monitoring within project delivery was perceived to be one of the most significant capacity-building outcomes of SSF, enabling grantees to establish baselines, measure progress and strengthen the evidence base for future management and funding. Future initiatives should require applicants to include a monitoring and baseline plan within their project design, with allocated funding to support this activity from the outset. This will help to ensure that evidence collected during delivery is consistent, robust and usable for both site management and programme-level evaluation.
4. **Alignment to statutory targets:** Definitions relating to statutory habitat targets were published after SSF project awards were made, meaning that neither fund design nor project planning could fully account for what activity would ultimately count towards the target. During delivery, additional clarification on thresholds and eligibility was provided after year one (see [Annex A](#)). Where possible, future programmes should ensure early alignment with published definitions and evidence requirements before the fund design and award stage and maintain these consistently throughout delivery.
5. **Green finance readiness:** Where future programmes identify green finance as an intended outcome, statutory bodies and funders should provide clear guidance and set realistic expectations with grantees from the outset about what is required to pursue green finance routes and what is achievable within the programme timeframe. Projects should also be encouraged to build monitoring and baseline data collection into their plans from the start, recognising that a

strong early evidence base is a prerequisite for developing credible investment cases.

6. **Partnership working:** Partnership working was consistently identified as a key enabler of effective delivery across SSF, supporting organisations to achieve outcomes that would not have been possible independently. The relationships, shared knowledge and collaborative ways of working established through SSF have in many cases continued beyond the funded period, with several partnerships already planning future joint work and funding bids. Future programmes should actively encourage and support partnership development from the outset, recognising that the relationships built through collaborative delivery represent a meaningful and lasting legacy for nature recovery.
7. **Cross-programme learning:** Future similar programmes should include structured opportunities for cross-programme learning during delivery, enabling grantees to share approaches, respond to common challenges and understand their contribution to a wider national nature recovery effort.

Annex A: Technical Annex

Purpose

This Technical Annex outlines the validation framework to be applied when analysing project-level habitat data for the Species Survival Fund (SSF) programme's reporting towards the statutory habitat target. It consolidates the clarification and guidance provided by Natural England (NE) and establishes a consistent set of principles, definitions and evidence requirements to be used in the final evaluation for SSF.

The aim is to ensure clarity, transparency and consistency in the application of statutory habitat target definitions, particularly where complex habitat classifications and baseline conditions are involved.

Context

During interim analysis for the SSF evaluation, several technical areas were identified where definitions or data interpretation required clarification to ensure consistent approaches across SSF habitat reporting. These areas are summarised below as context for the validation principles set out in this annex.

Wildlife-Rich Habitats, Priority Habitats, and Interpretation of Priority Habitat Inventory (PHI)

In some cases, PHI mapping did not fully align with observed on-site baseline habitat type. Clarification was therefore sought on:

- Whether project-reported baseline habitat type can supersede PHI classifications; and
- How to document instances where on-the-ground evidence differs from PHI.

Application of Statutory Habitat Target Definitions

Clarification was required on the application of statutory habitat target definitions to ensure consistency in classifying reported actions. Specifically, this related to:

- The definitions of Wildlife-rich Habitats and the distinction between creation, restoration, and management (enhancement and maintenance);
- Whether improvements to existing priority habitats in poor condition constitute restoration or enhancement; and
- Appropriate use of the term 'enhancement' within management classifications.

Defra and NE confirmed that habitat target statutory reporting only counts actions that increase the extent of wildlife-rich habitat. Improvements to the condition of existing priority habitat fall under management (enhancement), not restoration.

Scope

This annex applies to all SSF habitat-related actions reported as creation, restoration or management (including enhancement). It provides guidance on:

- The interpretation of baseline and target habitat classifications,
- Treatment of activity which occurs on sites which overlap the PHI,
- Application of statutory habitat target definitions,
- Evidence requirements for the SSF evaluation analysis.

The definitions agreed with Defra and Natural England are included in Box 1:

Box 1: Definitions of Habitat change – From DEFRA and Natural England

Habitat Creation: Actions to establish wildlife-rich habitats (listed in TIN 219) that are of sufficient quality to support the species that are typically found in that habitat. Habitat creation leads to an **increase in the extent** of wildlife-rich habitat

Habitat Restoration: Actions leading to an **increase in the extent** of wildlife-rich habitat, and refers to:

- action on sites which contain relict habitat (small, fragmented patches) amongst larger areas of non-wildlife-rich habitats that leads to the expansion of wildlife-rich habitat to cover the whole area.
- action on 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 nonnative species (INNS) where sufficient action is being undertaken to remove all these adverse pressures to facilitate restoration to a more natural state which would be considered wildlife-rich habitat
- Woodlands with more than 70% non-native tree species where sufficient action is being taken to reduce the cover of the non-native canopy trees to establish a wildlife-rich habitat
- action on existing habitat (possibly wildlife-rich) that has developed in a degraded ecosystem; so that when the ecosystem is restored it will result in the establishment of new or alternative wildlife-rich habitat. An example would be the restoration of a dry drained floodplain to support wet wildlife-rich habitats.

Habitat management: Includes both habitat enhancement and maintenance. Habitat management does not result in an increased extent of habitat.

Habitat Enhancement: A type of habitat management, involving actions to improve habitat condition and quality. Improvement is different from restoration because it does not impact the extent of habitat.

Habitat Maintenance: A type of habitat management, involving actions to keep habitat extent, condition, and quality at a wildlife-rich habitat state. **Habitat restoration and creation action is differentiated from habitat 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 priority habitat definitions. E.g., the wet woodland priority habitat description, “w1d Wet woodland – Occurs on poorly drained or seasonally wet soils, usually with Alder *Alnus glutinosa*, Birch *Betula* spp. and Willows *Salix* spp. as the predominant tree species, but sometimes including Ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, Oak *Quercus* spp., Scots Pine *Pinus sylvestris* and Beech *Fagus sylvatica* on the drier riparian areas”. Even if only one of these species is present but the ground conditions are as given in the description, this is mapped as priority habitat. Therefore, if the project ecologist has identified this priority habitat even in poor ecological condition it would be considered enhancement. Activity to enhance this habitat will be important for the species targets so should be reported in the final SSF evaluation as habitat enhancement.

Box 2 shows the definitions on Baseline and Target Habitat Classifications:

Box 2: Definitions of Baseline and Target Habitat Classifications

6.2 Principles

Baseline habitat type should be determined using the best available evidence and reflect actual on-site condition. Target habitats must align with statutory definitions of wildlife-rich habitat available in Table 2 of [TIN219](#) and reflect the expected ecological outcome of the action taken. If some action has been taken but further action is required for the habitat to become wildlife-rich habitat it should not be recorded towards the habitat target.

6.3 Alignment of Baseline and Target Habitats

If the baseline and target habitats are the same, this action will be counted as habitat management and not count towards the statutory habitat target. Unless it fits in one of the examples of restoration above. This is only the case for the situations listed under restoration above.

Habitats considered degraded and suitable for restoration

Wildlife-rich habitats are defined by the legislation that sets the target, as the **priority habitats** listed under Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006) or a habitat type listed under [Schedule 1](#) of the Environmental Targets (Biodiversity) (England) Regulations 2023.

To note, unless it is one of the habitats that can be considered degraded and under the specific degradation circumstances (Table A.1), a priority habitat is a wildlife-rich habitat, even if not in pristine condition (see comment on wet woodland above for an example).

Below are the specific priority habitats and the specific circumstances where they can be considered degraded. This list is exhaustive as of the time of writing this document.

Table A.1: Habitats which can overlap with the Priority Habitat definitions, but where activity can be defined as restoration

Habitat	Circumstance
- Blanket bog - Lowland raised bog - Lowland fens - Purple moor grass and rush pastures - Reedbeds - Other wetlands	- Developed on degraded peat - Hydrological restoration is required to restore the peat
Upland acid grassland	- NOT 1 of 3 sub types - The lowland dry acid grassland definition but occur in the uplands - Meet the annex 1 of the EU Habitats Directive habitat definition for <i>Nardus</i> grassland on siliceous substrates in mountain areas. - Meet the criteria for wax cap grasslands and be in the uplands.
- Neutral grassland - Lowland heathland - Upland heathland - Mountain heaths and willow scrub	- Developed on degraded peat - Hydrological restoration is required to restore the peat
- Freshwater - Coastal - Estuarine	- Affected by: - Pollution, and - Physical modifications or damage, and

Habitat	Circumstance
	3. Impacted hydrological regimes, and 4. Invasive non-native species (INNS)
• Woodland	1. >30% Non-native canopy trees
• Woodland	1. Restoration of a wildlife-rich habitat from woodland through the Forestry Commission's open habitat policy, including: ○ removal of conifers on coastal sand dunes
• Terrestrial semi-natural habitats	1. Behind sea defences 2. Restoration of coastal processes, including: ○ alignment allowing saline inundation ○ cliff erosion ○ removal of defences to allow roll-back of sand dune systems 3. Of sufficient to distinguish this from improvements to on-site management

Treatment of Activity overlapping with Priority Habitat Inventory (PHI)

Principles

There may be instances where the habitat observed on the ground does not match the habitat represented in the PHI at that location. In such instances on the ground evidence should take priority.

Application

Where the PHI and on-the-ground evidence of baseline habitat type via project data submission differ:

- Project-reported baseline habitat may be used as the authoritative baseline;
- A brief note should record that PHI and ground evidence differ and that the ground evidence is being taken as authoritative over the PHI;
- No additional evidence beyond normal project reporting is required.

This ensures consistency in handling PHI overlaps while recognising the limitations of national datasets.

Habitats that are not currently Priority Habitat but are on the wildlife-rich list, which when not in good condition could be sites for Priority Habitat can be creation or restoration.

There are a number of terrestrial wildlife-rich habitats in schedule 1 of the statutory instrument for the habitat target which are not also priority habitats. These habitats are considered to be of lower distinctiveness, as per the BNG classification. Consequently, when they are also not in good condition as per the BNG condition assessment, they are considered to not be supporting typical species and are therefore not considered wildlife-rich habitat. This is in contrast to priority habitats, which are always considered wildlife-rich habitats regardless of BNG condition because if they are able to be identified as priority habitat, they are considered to be supporting typical species. Consequently, habitats in schedule 1 of the statutory instrument that are not in good condition but have action upon them that can create or restore a priority habitat can count towards the habitat target. As this represents a change from a non-priority habitat to a priority habitat this is seen as creation or restoration rather than habitat enhancement. The terrestrial habitats to which this applies are listed in table A.2.

Table A.2: UKHab classes that do not correspond to priority habitats and can be wildlife-rich habitat when in good condition or a starting point for habitat creation or restoration when not in good condition.

Non- Priority Habitat name and UKHab code
Other lowland acid grasslands (g1d)
Other neutral grasslands (g3c)
Blackthorn scrub (h3a)
Hazel scrub (h3b)
Bramble scrub (h3d)
Gorse scrub (h3e)
Hawthorn scrub (h3f)
Mixed scrub (h3h)
Other inland rock and scree (s1d)

Any other habitat not on the wildlife-rich habitat list can be a starting point for actions.

Implementation in Final Analysis

Where discrepancies arise between PHI, project-reported baseline habitat and observed condition:

- The evaluation team will assess evidence against the validation rules in this annex.
- Where justified, classifications will be adjusted to reflect the most accurate representation of ecological reality.
- All adjustments must be recorded in the evaluation log.

A consistent evidence hierarchy will be applied:

- Primary Evidence
 - On-site assessments, habitat condition surveys, specialist ecological reports.
- Secondary Evidence
 - Photographs, management plans, documented expert judgement from project teams.
- Indicative Evidence
 - GIS layers (including PHI), remote sensing outputs, national mapping datasets.

Where evidence sources conflict, primary evidence will take precedence over secondary or indicative datasets.

Annex B: Evaluation Methodology

A range of research activity was delivered between October 2025-May 2026:

- A final interview with the project manager for each of the 20 SSF projects (20 online in-depth interviews). These interviews sought to obtain grantee feedback on the progress of project delivery in the final year of delivery alongside key delivery strengths and challenges, perceived impact and likely legacy.
- Site visits to all 20 projects (October 2025-January 2026) to observe project-level activity to better understand project delivery and impact. Please note that this was the second of two site visits, informing longitudinal case studies on each project. The first site visits took place between February-August 2025.
- 14 workshops which included 91 project staff across all 20 projects (November 2025-January 2026). These workshops were an opportunity for grantees and their partners to explore key strengths and challenges of their project delivery and their perceived impact of their projects 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 2026 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. Please note that monitoring data was self-reported by projects. Whilst definitions and guidance were provided, the categorisation of activities was open to interpretation, and some overlap between categories is likely.
- A desk-based ecological review of spatial data submitted. Spatial data was submitted for 647 sites where SSF-funded actions have been completed, with all 20 projects submitting spatial data for 2,250 actions. 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 understanding potential contributions towards the statutory habitat target involved 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 involved auditing baseline conditions against actions, verifying consistency, raising queries for discrepancies, and applying expert judgement when responses were unclear. An internal confidence rating is applied to each assessment.

- Step 3: Data Cleaning – The spatial dataset was 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 were spatially evaluated with regard to protected sites and their English region.

Findings throughout this report draw on the full range of evidence sources above and are not restated by source at each point. It is worth noting that qualitative findings from interviews, workshops and project-level evaluations reflect what grantees and staff reported about their own delivery and impact, whilst the ecological assessment of spatial data provides an independent, externally assessed judgement on the likely contribution of habitat action to the statutory wildlife-rich habitat target. Where a finding comes from a single named source, such as a specific project's own evaluation, this is referenced directly.

It should be noted that since the interim evaluation, and through close working between Wavehill, Environment Systems, the Heritage Fund, Defra and Natural England, additional clarification was developed on the thresholds required for project actions to qualify as habitat creation, restoration or management under the statutory habitat target definitions. This clarification established more precise requirements around what constitutes an increase in the extent of wildlife-rich habitat and has been applied consistently in the final analysis. It is important to acknowledge that these definitions were not published until after project awards had already been made, meaning that fund design and project planning were undertaken without the benefit of the clarity that now exists around what activity would count towards the statutory target.

It is important to note that SSF has played a significant role in developing and refining the practical application of the statutory habitat target definitions. As one of the first programmes to report against these targets at scale, SSF has provided an early opportunity to apply these definitions across a range of habitat types and delivery contexts. The clarifications provided by Natural England during the evaluation period reflect an iterative process of refinement that SSF has directly informed, and the approach developed through this evaluation is expected to support more consistent and robust reporting across future programmes.

Annex C: Value for Money methodology

B.1: Unit costs

Calculating unit costs is a systematic approach that considers the costs of delivering activities alongside the benefits that they produce in order to determine whether they represent good value for money. Furthermore, it is useful for future projects or programmes to give an understanding of the costs associated with particular activities or outcomes. However, these figures should be interpreted alongside the understanding that efficiency should be assessed in the context of delivering multiple, interdependent outcomes and building long-term capacity, rather than purely minimising cost per unit of output.

In line with HM Treasury's [Green Book](#) and [Magenta Book](#) guidance, unit cost analysis is most appropriate and rigorous where costs can be associated with a singular main output or outcome. When applying this to SSF, additional consideration must be given to the range of activities and outcomes for the programme. As such, this analysis includes two types of cost-effectiveness analysis:

- Comparing the unit costs of groups of projects which have delivered activity across similar habitat types
- Associating cost with delivering individual outcomes where these have been widely delivered across the portfolio of projects, such as jobs supported and trees planted.

The financial data used for the unit-cost analysis include information from the value for money survey, project costs and project expenditure. Where project cost data is used, this includes the actual cost multiplied by the proportion of costs spent on the relevant activity, as provided by projects through the value for money survey. Therefore, some unit-costs are only possible for those projects that have responded to the survey (n=17) and others for those where final expenditure data was available (n=16).

There are a number of limitations to consider when interpreting the following analysis:

- Firstly, when interpreting the data, additional consideration should be given to contextual factors of each project and the ways in which outcomes have been delivered. For example, the costs associated with tree planting will differ considerably depending on who is planting the tree. Some projects have held community planting days with members of the public, some may have relied on existing volunteers to plant trees, and some will have employed contractors, all with different associated costs. Understandings of what 'value for money' constitutes for each of these examples will vary, whether this be financial efficiency, social value, or otherwise.

- Secondly, costs have been associated based on figures reported by projects, which may be subject to different interpretations by those responding to the survey. For example, what one project calls ‘tree planting’ may be considered as ‘conservation’ by another. This presents a challenge when scaling these proportions to project costs, which may result in figures which are not true to value.
- Staff costs have been estimated using expenditure data which reflects the financial claims made by projects as opposed to claims accepted. Therefore, these figures are a slightly greater than actual project costs.
- Finally, the cost-effectiveness analysis below must be understood in the context of the types of value within habitat restoration. For example, the area having benefitted from many types of conservation activities may be relatively small, such as pond creation or the removal of non-native invasives, but represent an important contribution to biodiversity and nature restoration.

B.2: Indirect jobs

Cost data have been grouped based on areas of expenditure and been attributed a two-digit Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) code relevant to these activities. Using data from the ONS Annual Business Survey (2023), a ‘turnover per job’ metric has been estimated using the number of people employed divided by the total turnover in these sectors in England. From this, it is possible to estimate the number of indirect jobs supported by the programme. It should be noted that there may be additional indirect employment effects at a local level due to continued indirect spending within local supply chains, which is dependent on the locations of suppliers and contractors used by grantees.

SIC	Description
2.4	Support services to forestry
74.9	Other professional, scientific & technical activities n.e.c.
42.99	Other civil engineering projects n.e.c.

B.3: Value for Money Assessment Criteria

The table below sets out the criteria used to inform the high, moderate and low judgements for each of the 4Es.

VfM Dimension	Core assessment question	Evidence considered	High value for money	Moderate value for money	Low value for money
Economy	Were resources secured and managed at an appropriate cost, while maintaining sufficient quality for delivery?	Budget and expenditure data, underspend/overspend, procurement evidence, match funding, in-kind contributions, use of contingency, project evidence on cost pressures and delivery constraints.	Resources were secured at reasonable cost, with evidence of appropriate financial management, use of match or in-kind contributions, and limited unexplained underspend or overspend. Any underspend is clearly linked to contingency, delivery delays or external constraints rather than weak planning or poor use of funds.	Resources were generally managed appropriately, but with some evidence of budget variation, underspend or cost pressure. Explanations are plausible, although financial management or forecasting may have been affected by delivery constraints, market volatility or limited planning time.	Evidence suggests weak budget management, substantial unexplained underspend or overspend, limited evidence of cost control, or insufficient justification that resources were secured at appropriate cost.
Efficiency	Were resources converted into outputs at a reasonable cost and within the available	Outputs delivered against plan, habitat activity delivered, unit costs per hectare, cost per event, tree planting unit	Outputs were delivered at or above expected levels, with unit costs that are broadly comparable to relevant benchmarks or justified by project complexity. Delivery was well managed, with evidence that projects adapted effectively to	Outputs were partly or mostly delivered, but with some variation in scale, timing or cost. Unit costs are higher than some comparators, but this is partly explained by delivery context, such	Outputs were materially below expectations relative to expenditure, with high or weakly justified unit costs, limited evidence of adaptation, or

VfM Dimension	Core assessment question	Evidence considered	High value for money	Moderate value for money	Low value for money
	delivery period?	costs, employment outputs, delivery timelines, staff and contractor capacity, evidence of adaptation during delivery.	maximise outputs within available budgets and timescales.	as habitat complexity, contractor availability, weather or other constraints.	significant delivery inefficiencies that reduced the value achieved from the resources used.
Effectiveness	Did the funded activity achieve intended outcomes and contribute to programme objectives?	Habitat creation, restoration and management outcomes, contribution to wildlife-rich habitat targets, species outcomes, employment and skills outcomes, engagement outcomes, additionality evidence, project interviews, monitoring data	Strong evidence that intended outcomes were achieved or exceeded, including additional habitat, species, employment, engagement or capacity outcomes. Benefits are likely to be additional to what would otherwise have occurred and there is credible evidence of legacy or sustained impact.	Evidence indicates that several intended outcomes were achieved, but with variation across projects, some limitations in monitoring data, or uncertainty about the scale, durability or attribution of outcomes. Additionality is plausible but not consistently evidenced across all outcomes.	Limited evidence that intended outcomes were achieved, outcomes were substantially below expectations, or the additional contribution of funding is unclear. Benefits appear limited, weakly evidenced or unlikely to be sustained.

VfM Dimension	Core assessment question	Evidence considered	High value for money	Moderate value for money	Low value for money
		and qualitative case evidence.			
Equity	Were benefits distributed fairly and did activity reach target groups, places or communities facing barriers to participation?	Geographic spread, deprivation data, target audience evidence, accessibility improvements, engagement with underrepresented groups, community participation, volunteer and staff diversity data, evidence from project interviews.	Clear evidence that activity reached relevant target groups or places, including communities facing barriers to accessing organised environmental activity. Delivery was inclusive, accessible and responsive to local needs, with benefits distributed across a range of geographies and audiences.	Some evidence that activity reached target groups or priority places, but reach was uneven, monitoring data was incomplete, or inclusion was stronger in some projects than others. Barriers were recognised and partly addressed.	Limited evidence that activity reached target groups or priority places, benefits were concentrated among already engaged groups, or there was insufficient consideration of accessibility, inclusion or geographic need.

