

# NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR AREAS OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY: FUTURE LANDSCAPES PROJECT EVALUATION

December 2019

## 1 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH APPROACH

The intention was to hear from across the spectrum of project stakeholders, covering a common set of topics which were outlined in the project’s evaluation framework and which would give insights in line with the intended outcomes described in the project’s theory of change.

Method	Detail
Phone interviews	2 Trustees 3 National Association staff members 2 Lead Officers Contractors – Simon Matthews Associates, Odyssey
Structured conversations	10 Taking the Lead participants
National Association Taking the Lead survey	Review of survey summary
Interactive exercise	All attendees at Taking the Lead celebration event.

Following this information-gathering, the R4C evaluation team carried out an internal team analysis exercise which fed into a Validation and Learning Workshop held with key project stakeholders. This included a formative discussion leading to the evaluation conclusions presented in this report.

## 2 ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

At the outset of the evaluation, a high level theory of change was developed with key stakeholders of the project. Within this, the outcomes that they anticipated achieving by the end of the project were articulated, together with outcomes that they aspired to in the much longer term. These are shown in the diagram overleaf.



#### OUTCOMES FOR AONB STAFF

##### **Demonstrate particular attitudes and behaviours**

- Taking responsibility
- Taking action
- Collaborating
- Being mutually supportive to staff in their own and other AONBs
- A 'can do' attitude
- Enthusiasm, energy & vigour
- Challenging other people's behaviour
- Communicate with and engage constructively with staff in other AONBs
- Are aware of and understand the purpose of the National Association



#### OUTCOMES FOR AONBs

##### **See themselves and act as part of a network of AONBs**

- AONBs are collaborating with one another, for mutual benefit
- AONB staff are helping other AONBs
- AONB staff understand and value the core purpose of the National Association



#### OUTCOMES FOR NAAONB

##### **Is functioning as effectively as possible in pursuit of its core purposes**

- Suitable governance documents, procedures and practices are in place and followed.
- The Board of Trustees is made up of a mix of individuals with highly relevant interests and passions, capabilities and experience.
- The membership of the organisation is broad and inclusive of interests across the sector.

## ULTIMATE OUTCOMES

...There is strong alignment from grassroots through to the National Association Board

.... Collaboration is endemic

...The AONBs perceive themselves and behave as a network (and not a family)

....The National Association is fully fit for purpose

... AONBs and the National Association are better able to cope with the strictures of austerity and the uncertainties of the Brexit & post-Brexit years.

### 3 A FLAVOUR OF RESPONDENTS' COMMENTS

The most useful thing was making connections – a support network for me.

I realised I'd have to approach work with a couple of colleagues a bit differently.

We need to raise our game, to keep at the collaborative approach.

Different job roles being brought together pulls all those strengths together, operating as peers, and brought in people that wouldn't usually have a say.

I'm not sure about Lumina Spark.

Some of the exercises were really insightful, but sometimes the connection between the Lumina and the skills workshops wasn't there.

Doing it together gave us a really loud voice.

I haven't heard anything about the Sustainability and Governance work

I hadn't done anything like this before. I hadn't understood my strengths and how I can influence others. I feel better about how I work and value myself more.

We're all feeling warm towards each other now.

I know their staff names now and can contact them. I can talk NAAONB to others.

## 4 FINDINGS: WHAT PEOPLE TOLD US

This section of the report presents a summary of the feedback that the evaluators received; there is no analysis.

### 4.1 Overall achievements

Respondents were asked to give an overview of what they thought the Future Landscapes project had achieved.

- Personal understanding and development.
- More collaboration between individuals in different AONBs.
- Examples of AONB staff taking on roles at a national level.
- More awareness of how the Trustee Board needs to change.
- A limited amount of increased understanding amongst AONB staff about the National Association.

Respondents were then asked to give their views about what each of the workstreams had achieved.

### 4.2 Successes of the Sustainability and Governance workstream

- There had been helpful trustee involvement in discussing these issues.
- There was now more visibility for key issues relating to sustainability and governance, in particular leadership in terms of the composition and behaviour of trustees.
- Commitment to open recruitment, and starting down this route.

### 4.3 Successes of the Taking the Lead workstream

- The work elicited strong commitment from across the AONBs and participants despite strong demands on their time, although this was not universal (with a few AONBs not taking part, and a small number of individuals dropping out during the course of the project).
- It had helped AONB staff members to get to know people in other AONBs and the National Association, and to create an active support network for the participating individuals.
- Examples of collaborative behaviour were demonstrated, inside and outside the project activities.
- It provided a rare opportunity for AONB staff development, which was particularly appreciated by Lead Officers for their teams.

- Participants reported increased self-awareness and personal development, and cited examples of how this had impacted on their work practices.
- Examples were given of individual AONB staff members stepping up to deliver activities at a national level, which was a new and welcome development from a National Association perspective.
- There was a variety of tangible outputs from the Topic Working Groups. The external profile achieved by the Poet Laureate’s work was particularly welcomed, but the work by groups which have produced internal resources is also valued.

#### 4.4 Factors which had helped or hindered delivery

The evaluation team were keen to understand the factors which participants felt had contributed to the success or otherwise of the project.

HELPING	HINDERING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participating staff at different levels and with different roles in AONBs.</li> <li>• Project staff – roles and capabilities.</li> <li>• The project’s Topic Working Groups gave their members ‘weight’ to act at national level.</li> <li>• Aiming for tangible outputs from the Topic Working Groups.</li> <li>• Participants’ commitment and energy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The logistical challenges of meeting up.</li> <li>• Time commitment required.</li> <li>• Communication issues with contractors.</li> </ul>

#### 4.5 Reflections on the delivery model

Respondents were asked to give their views about how the project had been delivered.

- The two workstreams operated quite separately, with little sharing of information between them.
- Some participants found the Lumina Spark tool extremely useful, others less so.
- The Topic Working Group approach led to positive outcomes, both in terms of tangible outputs and positive changes for participants.
- Some participants felt that the skills training workshops had not been as useful as they could be.
- There were some issues with both delivery contractors, including issues around lack of communication and problems relating to some of the activities provided.

#### 4.6 The most significant difference

Respondents were asked to complete the following sentence: “In my view, the most significant change that the Future Landscapes project has brought about is....”. Having aggregated the responses, the three most common categories of response – in descending order – were:

- New relationships and networks
- The value of collaboration
- Self-confidence and self-awareness.

[See Appendices for the full list of responses]

This is a helpful tool for gaining a non-indicator led approach to understanding changes brought about by a project. In this case, it has confirmed the responses from other elements of the evaluation.

## 5 ANALYSIS: THE PERSPECTIVE FROM THE EVALUATION TEAM

In this section, we present the evaluation team’s analysis of the findings from the information-gathering exercises, structuring these in relation to the outcomes that the stakeholders had articulated within the high level theory of change.

### 5.1 Outcomes for AONB staff

- Taking the Lead participants are showing that they clearly understand the value of working in a collaborative manner – at a personal level and more widely.
- They have begun to grow a wider personal support network, which is working beyond the remits of their Topic Working Groups and is providing a benefit that they had not expected prior to starting the project.
- For some, there has been significant personal development, with knock-on benefits for their working practice.
- Some understand more about the National Association, while other respondents (particularly lead officers who had already had exposure to the National Association) felt that they already had a reasonable understanding. And some have begun to think more about the relationship between AONBs and the National Association, including understanding where they can take on roles in support of the National Association and feeling sufficient confidence and ‘permission’ to consider doing so.

### 5.2 Outcomes for AONBs

- There is more of a sense of being part of a ‘bigger thing’, although whether this is a ‘family’ or a ‘network’ – and with the different associations that each term holds – has not yet been bottomed out.
- There is some degree of more understanding about the positive potential to play a role at the national level, working with the National Association.
- There is more active communication between AONBs through the staff who have participated in Taking the Lead, not only to do with Taking the Lead activities.

### 5.3 Outcomes for the National Association

- Relationships between National Association staff and AONB staff members have increased in number and strength.
- There is some more awareness and understanding amongst AONB staff about the National Association.



- There is more clarity and visibility about the important issues to tackle in relation to sustainability and governance, although trustee engagement needs strengthening.
- There is more understanding of the ingredients for success when commissioning work.

#### 5.4 'Big Message' outcomes

It is helpful to take a 'big picture' look at the outcomes resulting from the Future Landscapes project. The evaluation team began by picking out a few words to summarise their impressions:

**Positivity      Forward looking      Taking ownership      Together**

Looking at this in more detail, we note that:

- There is undoubtedly more collaboration, as a result of the project, covering
  - How individuals behave
  - And a growing a sense of the value of collaboration
- There is more consideration about the role of the National Association and its changing relationship to AONBS
  - Individuals within AONBs are 'stepping up' to take on roles at a national level, in support of the aims and intentions of the National Association.
  - The project has been instrumental in opening up the question about the National Association's role, both within the trustee Board and the wider membership. This includes the National Association thinking about what barriers might (inadvertently) be in place that stop or make it harder for AONB staff to become active at a national level.
- The project has helped to open up the trustee Board to change, particularly developing their thinking about
  - Recruitment of new trustees, with a commitment to open recruitment.
  - Understanding the importance of taking leadership, where they would be more pro-active, and would act more strongly in terms of 'keeping the vision' and providing strategic steer.

## 6 LEARNING – SOME PRACTICAL THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

The value of this evaluation lies most strongly in the learning that National Association trustees and staff can draw out for their work, both during the course of project delivery and going forwards into future work. We have suggestions about a small number of work areas, where we think that there is particularly valuable learning.

- The process of commissioning, managing and working with contractors.
  - Careful planning of the work to be done and the brief, including risk assessment
  - The importance of on-going two-way communication
  - Performance monitoring, including clarity on the sanctions to be used if there is non-performance.
- Making Lumina work for you
  - Can it work on its own?
  - The sensitivity and empathy required for its successful use, including regard to safeguarding.
  - The value of an external facilitator with the skills and authority to bring challenge (noting that 'external' may mean within the NAAONB network, but external to a particular AONB or working group).
- The logistics dilemma
  - How to make travel worth it
- Topic Working Groups without the project funding
  - Which ones have real reason to carry on? Are there new topics to cover?
  - What resource would they need?

## 7 WHAT TO DO NEXT

Our analysis of the findings, together with discussion of these with a small group of project stakeholders, led us to a point of creating a small number of key questions that we leave with the National Association's staff and trustees. The intention is that these guide the leaders of the organisation to think about the most important matters for the organisation's future that have been brought to the fore by this project.

- How to extend and strengthen the tender new shoots of collaborative behaviours around the AONBs.
  - What ideas did Taking the Lead participants put forward?
  - What work most needs doing, where the National Association could benefit most from AONB input and help?
  
- How to build on the Board's growing self-awareness of the skills and behaviours that it needs to exhibit, in particular in relation to organisational leadership.
  - Open recruitment, in line with needs identified by a skills audit.
  - Structure their work in ways that encourage the desired behaviours.
  - Put the big issues that need their leadership on the agenda.
  
- Recognising that the project has brought the National Association to a position where it understands that it needs to change how it works in order to respond to individual AONB staff and AONBs beginning to work differently, and in light of the issues raised through the Sustainability and Governance workstream, there is a question about how to untangle the complex National Association/AONBs relationship - clarifying what the National Association and the AONBs 'ask and offer' is of each other, and therefore how the National Association would best be structured.
  - Start the ball rolling at 11<sup>th</sup> December trustee meeting.

# APPENDIX

## **In my view, the most significant change that the Future Landscapes project has brought about is....**

Developing links with colleagues from across the AONB family, having a support network for all things AONB – day to day and big picture – and having the opportunity to contribute to NAAONB work.

Closer working relationship between AONB officers.

Bringing colleagues together as a cohort for a common cause, for positive landscapes.

Enabled a wide range of staff from different areas and roles to contribute to shared AONB network priorities, with the support of the National Association.

Achieve multiple AONBs working together.

The building of relationships with AONB family and aspiration to collaborate for common goals and powerful outcomes.

Making active collaborations across the AONB family and the trust, honesty and sharing that comes with it.

Greater communication and collaboration across the AONB network.

Involving a new group of people more deeply in AONB family co-operation (i.e. not just Lead Officers).

The deepened trust, engagement and joint working in the AONB family.

That **it's the teams, the staff, not just the Lead Officers that can and should play a key role and be valued in creating change.**

Empowering AONB staff to collaborate (with a mandate) to take action that takes the AONB network forward nationally.

More significant collaboration as part of the national network across the AONBs. Without keeping up the momentum of this, we won't be ready and able to move forward.

The confidence to pick up the phone and call any AONB for help and advice.

The development of increased collaboration and a growth in awareness of the wider AONB network.

Participants who haven't previously had contact with staff from other AONBs now feel more part of a national family, with a network of contacts to call on for help.

I hope it has built confidence in participants to look beyond their individual AONBs and make active wider connections. And to dare to take risks and think big.

Embedded collaborative forms of working and raised awareness of asking the question "who should I talk to?"

Realising that there is a big network of skills, interests and experience available to help work locally – and working together gives us strength.

Working together.

The coming together of individuals from different backgrounds, ways of working, skillsets, areas to deliver tangible outputs for the network as a whole.

AONB officers have started working together across AONBs rather than sitting in their own area in isolation.

My ability to understand different work ethics within our own team and the recognition of the diversity of staff working within the AONB family.

Much better knowledge about the National Association and how my work fits into bigger picture. Personally I have much more confidence to do my job, much more aware about people's personalities/Lumina and how this plays out at team level/ NAAONB network.

Empowerment of staff.

About my personal development, specifically about disciplining myself to restrict time to plan and review. It has made me a better manager (subject to feedback).

An understanding of my drivers and how I like to work, and an insight into how others work.

A greater understanding of how I operate, the strengths and weaknesses of this.

Having a better understanding of how I react under pressure, and nationally seeing how 'task & finish' groups are a tool we should use more.

The need to shake up the Board.

This idea at the National Association level of a much greater understanding of the situation and what needs to happen about the structure of the National Association by the Board and the AONBs.