

wavehill

Social and economic research

wavehill.com

Green Recovery Challenge Fund Round Two

Second Interim Report



Green Recovery Challenge Fund


Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Heritage
Fund

 Environment
Agency


NATURAL
ENGLAND

Wavehill: Social and Economic Research

Our offices

- Wales office: 21 Alban Square, Aberaeron, Ceredigion, SA46 0DB (registered office)
- West England office: 2–4 Park Street, Bristol, BS1 5HS
- North of England office: Milburn House, Dean Street, Newcastle, NE1 1LF
- London office: 2.16 Oxford House, 49 Oxford Road, London, N4 3EY

Contact details

Tel: 0330 1228658

Email: wavehill@wavehill.com

Twitter: [@wavehilltweets](https://twitter.com/wavehilltweets)

More information

www.wavehill.com

<https://twitter.com/wavehilltweets>

© Wavehill: social and economic research.

This report is subject to copyright. The authors of the report (Wavehill: social and economic research) should be acknowledged in any reference that is made to its contents.

Report authors

Anna Burgess, Megan Clark, Andy Parkinson, Sarah Usher, and Paula Gallagher.

Any questions in relation to this report should be directed in the first instance to Anna Burgess at anna.burgess@wavehill.com.

Date of document: 21st April 2023

Version: Final

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the many individuals who gave their time to assist in the evaluation, all of whom were important in the writing of this report. This evaluation would not have been possible without all of these contributions.

List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
25YEP	25 Year Environment Plan
ALB	Arm's-Length Body
Defra	Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs
EA	Environment Agency
eNGO	Environmental Non-Governmental Organisation
EOI	Expression of Interest
FTE	Full-Time Equivalent
GRCF	Green Recovery Challenge Fund
Heritage Fund	National Lottery Heritage Fund
LNR	Local Nature Reserve
NEC	Not Elsewhere Classified
NEET	Not in Employment, Education or Training
NNR	National Nature Reserve
SAC	Special Area of Conservation
SOC	Standard Occupational Classification
SPA	Special Protection Area
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest

Contents page

Contents

Green Recovery Challenge Fund Round Two.....	1
Second Interim Report.....	1
More information	i
Acknowledgements	ii
List of abbreviations	ii
Contents page.....	iii
Contents	iii
Executive Summary	1
Introduction	1
The Evaluation.....	1
Nature Conservation and Restoration and Nature-Based Solutions.....	2
Connecting People with Nature	4
Resilience and Employment	5
Project Reflections.....	6
1. Introduction.....	8
1.1 The Evaluation	10
2. Nature Conservation and Restoration and Nature-Based Solutions.....	13
2.1 Reported Outcomes	14
2.2 Thematic Workshop Reflections.....	23
3. Connecting People with Nature	30
3.1 Reported Outcomes	30
3.2 Thematic Workshop Reflections.....	36
4. Resilience and Employment	41
4.1 Reported Outcomes	41
4.2 Thematic Workshop Reflections.....	46
5. Project Reflections.....	55
5.1 ALB Support.....	55
5.2 Lessons Learnt.....	56
5.3 Sustainability	59
6. Early Conclusions and Next Steps.....	62
6.1 Nature Conservation and Restoration and Nature-Based Solutions	62

6.2	Connecting People with Nature.....	63
6.3	Resilience and Employment.....	64
6.4	Project Reflections	65

Table of tables

Table 1.1:	Regional distribution of GRCF sites	9
Table 2.1:	Number and percentage of GRCF sites which are ‘priority habitats’ (over 10 sites).....	14
Table 2.2:	Sites which have a protection or designation	15
Table 2.3:	Area covered by grantee projects in hectares	16
Table 2.4:	Area covered by grantee projects in kilometres.....	17
Table 2.5:	Regional spread of habitat creation and restoration activity in hectares..	19
Table 2.6:	Regional spread of habitat creation and restoration activity in kilometres	21
Table 2.7:	Number of trees planted in each region	23
Table 3.1:	Number of people engaging with events by region.....	31
Table 3.2:	Number of events targeting groups	33
Table 3.3:	Number of engagement activities by region (including in-person and online)	33
Table 3.4:	Number of events by type (where detail on events was given).....	35
Table 3.5:	Amount of infrastructure installed or improved	36
Table 4.1:	Regional breakdown of job roles supported through GRCF in England ..	42
Table 4.2:	SOC group of roles supported for GRCF (over 10 jobs).....	45

Table of figures

Figure 1.1:	Map of Round 2 project sites with AONBs and National Parks	10
Figure 2.1:	Geographical spread of direct and indirect benefit of all nature conservation and restoration activity in hectares.....	18
Figure 2.2:	Geographical spread of linear direct and indirect benefit of all nature conservation and restoration activity in kilometres	20
Figure 2.3:	Geographical spread of number of trees planted (mapped onto National Park and AONB location)	22
Figure 3.1:	Number of people engaged in in-person events, (shown by location and mapped onto National Park and AONB location)	32
Figure 3.2:	Number of in-person and online events held in GRCF Round 2 projects (shown by location and mapped onto National Park and AONB location).....	34
Figure 4.1:	Number of FTE posts supported (shown by location and mapped onto National Park and AONB location)	43
Figure 4.2:	Working pattern of jobs supported through GRCF Round 2.....	44

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF) is an £80m fund seeking to support nature recovery and conservation across England. In June 2020, Defra announced the formation of GRCF Round 1 with a £40m investment. In November 2020, GRCF Round 2 (with an additional £40m investment) was announced via the Prime Minister's [Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution](#) to further support environmental renewal while creating and retaining a range of jobs in England. It is a short-term, competitive fund that has kick-started environmental renewal while creating and retaining thousands of jobs in England.

To ensure that delivery supports the 25YEP, all GRCF projects are required to deliver against one or more of the following three environmental themes:

1. Nature conservation and restoration: habitats, species and ecosystems,
2. Nature-based solutions, particularly for climate mitigation and adaptation, and
3. Connecting people with nature.

As the GRCF was created in direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic, all projects are also asked to align with the GRCF's aims to:

- Support job creation and retention as well as skill development within the conservation sector and its supply chains, and
- Enhance the capacity and resilience of eNGOs in terms of their financial stability, assets, skills, capabilities, and governance.

The GRCF is delivered by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (the Heritage Fund) in partnership with Defra, utilising both organisations' knowledge and expertise regarding the environment sector, public engagement, and grant funding. Furthermore, the GRCF is supported by the following arm's-length bodies: Natural England, the Environment Agency, and the Forestry Commission.

The Evaluation

The Heritage Fund commissioned Wavehill in February 2022 to undertake an evaluation of Round 2 of the GRCF. The focus of this evaluation is on providing insight into the delivery and outcomes of Round 2 projects, learning lessons from the second cohort of projects.

The questions that the evaluation will seek to answer include:

- What lessons have been learnt from delivering the Round 2 projects and what are their implications for future land and nature projects and investments?
This will include:
 - The opportunities and challenges presented for eNGOs by a successful application to the GRCF.
 - The influence of the external environment on projects (e.g. COVID-19 restrictions or the labour market).
- To what extent have the intended short-term outcomes of the GRCF been met through the second round of funding and, where comparisons are possible, how does this relate to findings from Round 1 of the GRCF?
- What legacy does the GRCF leave and how should Defra and partners continue to monitor the impact beyond the end of the programme?
- Has value for money been demonstrated in terms of the delivery of environmental, engagement and economic objectives during the second round of funding and for the programme overall? This includes:
 - How does the cost-effectiveness of the GRCF compare to that of other similar programmes?
 - Which sectors and occupations have benefitted from the implementation of the programme?
 - What is the geographical distribution of the benefits of the GRCF?

For this second interim report, the evaluation team have undertaken the following fieldwork:

- A review of the GRCF Round 2 monitoring information to date.
- Twelve in-depth case studies with a sample of the 90 projects funded through GRCF Round 2. Case study interviews were undertaken with project staff, volunteers and participants. Where possible, evaluation staff also visited project sites to better understand projects and the types of activities that they are delivering. For case studies, a total of 23 staff interviews, 14 participant interviews, 10 volunteer interviews, and eight site visits have been undertaken.
- Nine thematic workshops with 44 projects. Each workshop focused on an environmental theme against which projects are required to deliver in their GRCF Round 2 delivery (nature conservation and restoration: habitats, nature-based solutions, or connecting people with nature), and explored the delivery of activities, progress towards goals and challenges faced by projects to date.

Nature Conservation and Restoration and Nature-Based Solutions

Overall, 922 sites have benefitted environmentally from GRCF activity in England. Of all sites, 52 per cent had some designation or protection in place, with 14 per cent (125/922 sites) undertaking project activity on local wildlife sites and 12 per cent (107/922 sites) being classed as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

GRCF projects have directly benefited 98,968 ha and 129 km of land across 922 sites across England, including both habitat creation and restoration activity. Within this area, one percent (1079/98,968 ha) involved habitat creation, 56 per cent (55,731/98,968 ha) was habitat restoration and 2 per cent was both restoration and creation (1,494/98,968 ha). The area benefitted includes the direct creation or restoration of 36 km of hedgerows and 43 km of rivers.

As a direct result of GRCF Round 2 funding, 32 projects have planted 224,620 trees. Previous monitoring data in March 2022 suggested that 88,243 trees had been planted, which means that 136,377 trees were planted between March 2022 and January 2023.

Within GRCF Round 2 workshops and case studies, it was found that **grants have allowed projects to undertake more in-depth ecological studies than they are typically able to do.** This has helped projects to measure project delivery progress. Whilst most projects in workshops could outline the longer-term impacts that they can foresee occurring because of their project delivery, few were able to identify outcomes for nature and the environment that are measurable in the shorter term. This is unsurprising, given that conservation and restoration activities and nature-based solutions typically take time to develop and yield results, as they are dependent on a growing cycle. Whilst most projects are positive about the wider outcomes that they will see in the future, organisational staff and volunteers will need to continue with longitudinal surveys to identify long-term outcomes for nature and the environment.

Recommendation One: Future provision should look to offer additional support and guidance around the long-term monitoring of project impact. This will allow projects to prioritise specific impact measures and consider how they can sustainably monitor them post-funding.

Projects offered a multitude of examples demonstrating how they have supported staff, trainees and volunteers with technical training that would allow them to take part in and sustain nature conservation and restoration activities. Moreover, projects have been able to facilitate wider education and information sharing regarding nature conservation and restoration and nature-based solution activities to volunteers and the general public. In workshops, most projects reported offering a range of informal sessions e.g. guided walks and taster days to educate others on the nature the project is working on and how they are looking to support it through project delivery.

Securing landowner consent was the most common challenge identified by projects. These negotiations commonly took longer than projects anticipated, and required additional time and resources to manage. Furthermore, it was suggested that project challenges in securing consent from the Environment Agency and local authorities arose because projects had to engage with several different departments.

These were exacerbated by the EA's and local authorities' limited capacity to engage due to delays caused by COVID-19 disruption.

Recommendation Two: In future provision, projects should ensure that there is clear and ongoing communication with ALBs, other relevant organisations, and landowners with regard to plans and pipelines of activity to remind them of the commitments made at the application stage.

Connecting People with Nature

Overall, 104,750 people have engaged with 6,329 events held throughout GRCF Round 2 across England to date. Notably, 15 per cent (958/6,329) of events targeted people from a deprived background or NEET, with a further 12 per cent (774/6,329) targeting people with disabilities or long-term health conditions.

Engagement activities were held across England, with 1,574 engagement activities happening in the North West and 1,390 in the South West. The most common types of events were those which involved conservation work (2,504 events) such as tree planting or hedge laying, scrub clearance, or community litter-picking days. Events involving some element of training, such as workshops on particular species or training in particular skills for either volunteers, schoolchildren, or members of the public, were also common (954 events).

A wide range of infrastructure has been installed or improved, with 36 projects detailing works carried out over 174 sites. Projects which noted improving accessibility to sites included extending car parks to improve disability access, improving entrance ways, or creating seating and raised planters.

In workshops, projects commonly described delivering on multiple themes and felt that connecting people with nature provided a domino effect, wherein nature connectedness encouraged individuals to become involved in conservation and restoration activities. **Projects also reported that adopting the citizen science method has supported the management of nature moving forward and resulted in individuals understanding the importance of long-term engagement.**

Tight timescales commonly exacerbated project challenges in connecting people with nature. A minority of projects cited ongoing issues surrounding rural engagement due to poor transport links and difficulty in encouraging those from urban areas to engage with rural sites. This was particularly challenging where projects were looking to enhance the accessibility of projects to a range of diverse groups.

Whilst diverse engagement was noted as a challenge, several projects indicated that they previously could not engage with community organisations at all. The GRCF has provided the opportunity to begin this relationship-building

process. Specifically, the grant has enabled project engagement with pre-existing community groups to support nature connectedness.

Resilience and Employment

GRCF Round 2 has led to 706 roles being supported within 89 out of the 90 projects. These are equivalent to 484.2 FTE jobs. 482 roles have been created for the GRCF (68 per cent), 128 are existing roles protected from redundancy (18 per cent), and 92 roles involve partial support with full cost recovery (13 per cent).

Where new roles have been created, equalities data suggest that 32 per cent (154/482 roles) of recruits have been aged 25 years or below and nine per cent (43/482) are noted to be socioeconomically disadvantaged. Additionally, 19 are Black, Asian or Minoritised Ethnic Communities (four per cent), 15 have a disability or long-term health condition (three percent)per cent), and 13 are from the LGBTQ+ communities (three percent). Equalities data was given for 60 per cent of the roles, where the 32 per cent (154/482 roles) the response was not known and 9 per cent was left blank (41/482 roles). It is important to note that across the sector, 4.8 per cent of 'environmental professionals' identify as Black, Asian or Minoritised Ethnic Communities in comparison to 12.6 per cent of individuals across all other UK professions ([Racial diversity in environment professions](#), SOS-UK, 2022). **Whilst GRCF Round 2 is looking to support diversity within the sector, additional efforts will be needed to achieve this.**

In total, 138 apprenticeship roles were created. Monitoring data suggest that 55 roles are Kickstart positions and a further 24 are entry-level apprenticeships. -Seven roles are listed as Level 2 roles (equivalent to GCSE level) and a further seven as Level 3 roles (equivalent to A Level).

Project feedback on recruitment was mixed in workshops. On the one hand, projects were largely able to successfully recruit for their GRCF Round 2 roles or find alternative solutions where roles were left unfilled. However, projects also faced challenges in securing a diverse range of staff and retaining those whom they supported.

Whilst more is needed to ensure diversity within the sector, GRCF grants provided space and resources for projects to reflect on how to recruit inclusively and sustainably. Staff and trainees interviewed in in-depth case study interviews highlighted the risk of this recruitment appearing to be tokenistic. Whilst trainees and staff in these cases overcame these initial challenges, it is important to recognise that this is because detailed support plans and 'roadmaps for progression' were put in place prior to trainee recruitment.

Recommendation Three: When assessing future project bids, funders should consider whether trainee support plans are sufficient to support individuals and the diversification of the sector. Where plans are lacking, projects should seek specialist advice to aid trainee recruitment and support.

Challenges in staff and trainee recruitment typically stemmed from perceived short delivery times, temporary contracts, and competition from other GRCF Round 2 projects when recruiting. Many projects reported that because GRCF Round 2 was only an 18-month project, they were only able to offer short-term contracts to staff, resulting in some staff securing other employment before project closure. Where staff have left their posts, projects have commonly been unable to fill these vacancies, either due to the unattractiveness of a short-term contract or because of a lack of capacity to repeat recruitment processes. However, projects frequently commended the flexibility afforded to them by the Heritage Fund in these scenarios.

Recommendation Four: Future funding should consider if and how recruitment strategies could better account for increased competition for staff during short-term funds. This could include support in increasing the profile of opportunities and/or partnerships with other organisations with experience engaging with a diverse range of applicants.

Project Reflections

Support from ALBs has commonly been longer-term than just one meeting at the application stage. As a result, the initial meeting does not always appear to be pivotal in isolation. Projects have worked with ALBs within their project delivery due to their expertise and remit over land, forests, and other natural spaces. Where this was the case, projects found support from ALBs to be much more valuable once project delivery had commenced, with support before this being of limited use because of the finite time available to develop a bid. The finite duration of GRCF Round 2 has reminded eNGOs that where project time is limited, they need to be realistic in their engagement goals.

Recommendation Five: Future provision should consider whether funds used to provide ALB support at the application stage could be better used to offer finite support during project delivery. This could include offering ALB advice around organisational resilience and employment or using funds to facilitate network events in which projects and ALBs could engage, share experiences and challenges, and profit from greater peer network infrastructure.

In workshops, most projects highlighted that **GRCF Round 2 project delivery has reinforced how important it is to have space and time to recruit and train**

individuals for work relating to nature conservation and restoration and nature-based solutions. Projects acknowledged that training for these types of activity takes time and can be difficult but is crucial in ensuring that project delivery has tangible and effective impacts on nature and the environment.

Where projects were confident in their ability to sustain project activities beyond the lifetime of GRCF Round 2, this was commonly due to tangible outcomes that they have secured through their project's duration. Projects in workshops and in-depth case study interviews also emphasised that they are more likely to be able to sustain project activities and measure their impact due to the upskilling of volunteers and staff with regard to undertaking ecological surveys.

Where projects were less confident in their ability to sustain GRCF Round 2 activities, this was largely due to a lack of funding with which to do so. This is unsurprising, given wider global supply chain pressures, extreme seasonality, inflation, and pressures associated with the cost-of-living crisis within the environment sector. In these cases, however, GRCF Round 2 has provided an effective 'evidence base' that will help them moving forward.

1. Introduction

The Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF) is an £80m fund seeking to support nature recovery and conservation across England. In June 2020, Defra announced the formation of GRCF Round 1 with a £40m investment. In November 2020, GRCF Round 2 (with an additional £40m investment) was announced via the Prime Minister's [Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution](#) to further support environmental renewal while creating and retaining a range of jobs in England. It is a short-term, competitive fund that has kick-started environmental renewal while creating and retaining thousands of jobs in England. The GRCF is supporting a range of projects in restoring nature, using nature-based solutions to tackle climate change, and connecting people with the natural environment.

With the climate crisis continuing to worsen (RSPB and the State of Nature Partnership, [State of Nature Report 2019](#)), the GRCF also seeks to actively support and meet goals within the UK Government's [25 Year Environment Plan](#) (25YEP) to enhance people's engagement with the natural world and improve the environment within a generation.

To ensure that delivery supports the 25YEP, all GRCF projects are required to deliver against one or more of the following three environmental themes:

1. Nature conservation and restoration: habitats, species and ecosystems,
2. Nature-based solutions, particularly for climate mitigation and adaptation, and
3. Connecting people with nature.

As the GRCF was created in direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic, all projects are also asked to align with the GRCF's aims to:

- Support job creation and retention as well as skill development within the conservation sector and its supply chains, and
- Enhance the capacity and resilience of eNGOs in terms of their financial stability, assets, skills, capabilities, and governance.

Job retention and creation constitute a key component of the GRCF, particularly for people aged between 16 and 24. Applicants were encouraged to apply to the government's Kickstart scheme, which pays 100 per cent of costs for six-month job placements and can be used as a source of partnership funding for projects.

The GRCF is delivered by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (the Heritage Fund) in partnership with Defra, utilising both organisations' knowledge and expertise regarding the environment sector, public engagement, and grant funding. Furthermore, the GRCF is supported by the following arm's-length bodies: Natural England, the Environment Agency, and the Forestry Commission.

Overall, 159 projects have been funded through the GRCF, with 69 projects funded in Round 1 and 90 projects funded in Round 2. In June and July 2021, 90 projects

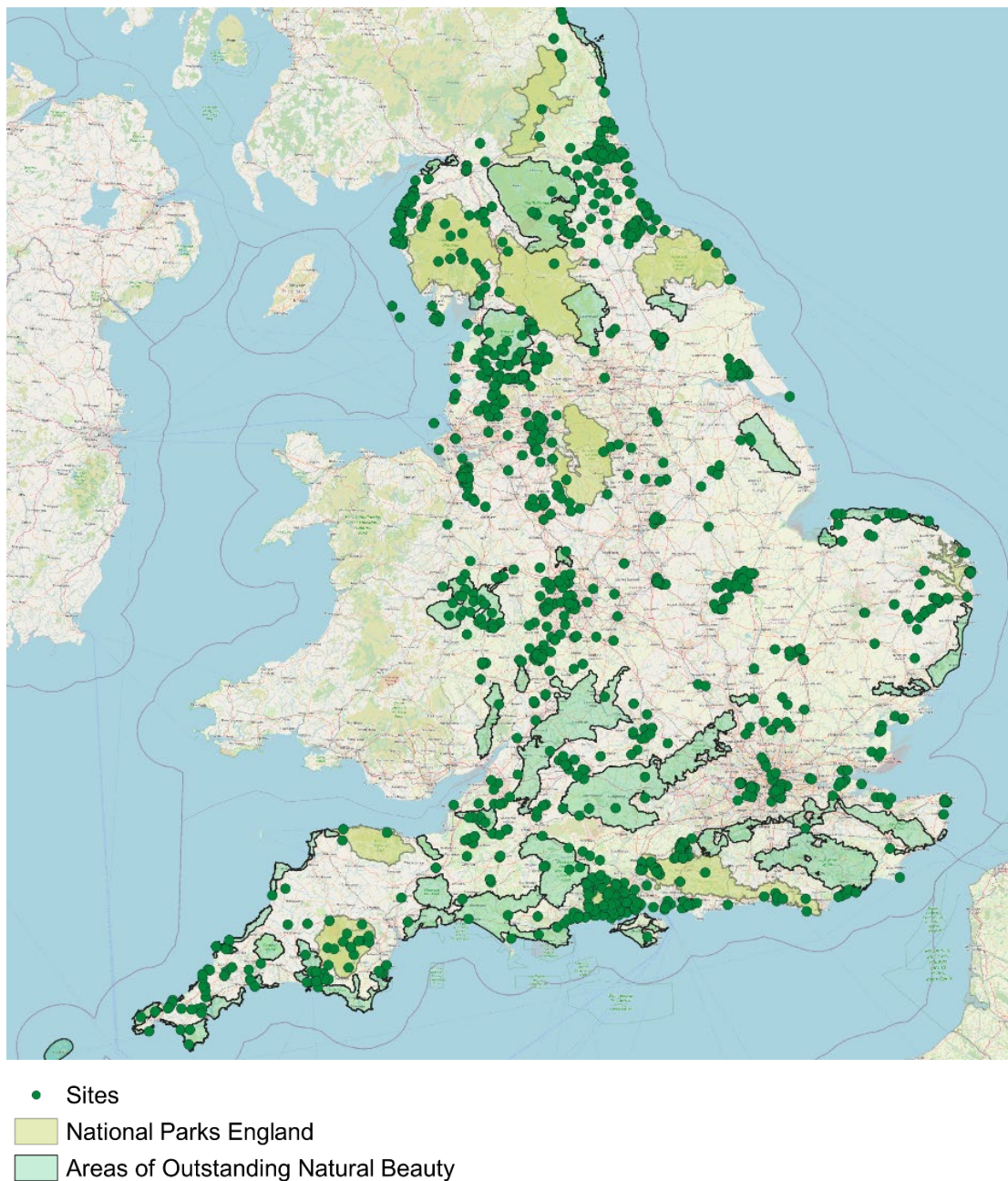
were awarded through GRCF Round 2. All projects were scheduled to end in March 2023, but 37 have been extended to June 2023. This evaluation is predominantly focused on the 90 GRCF Round 2 projects. Table 1.1 and Figure 1.1 below illustrate the geographical distribution of sites across GRCF Round 2.

Table 1.1: Regional distribution of GRCF sites

Region	Number of Sites
North West	282
South East	239
South West	185
North East	176
West Midlands	161
East of England	112
Yorkshire and the Humber	94
East Midlands	51
London	47
Total	1,347

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=1,347 sites).

Figure 1.1: Map of Round 2 project sites with AONBs and National Parks



Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=1,347 sites).

Please note that where maps are presented throughout this report, National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) are also displayed. This is intended to contextualise project reach and impact and illustrate project site placement alongside key areas of environmental importance across England.

1.1 The Evaluation

The Heritage Fund commissioned Wavehill in February 2022 to undertake an evaluation of Round 2 of the GRCF. The focus of this evaluation is on providing

insight into the delivery and outcomes of Round 2 projects, learning lessons from the second cohort of projects.

The questions that the evaluation will seek to answer include:

- What lessons have been learnt from delivering the Round 2 projects and what are their implications for future land and nature projects and investments?
This will include:
 - The opportunities and challenges presented for eNGOs by a successful application to the GRCF.
 - The influence of the external environment on projects (e.g. COVID-19 restrictions or the labour market).
- To what extent have the intended short-term outcomes of the GRCF been met through the second round of funding and, where comparisons are possible, how does this relate to findings from Round 1 of the GRCF?
- What legacy does the GRCF leave and how should Defra and partners continue to monitor the impact beyond the end of the programme?
- Has value for money been demonstrated in terms of the delivery of environmental, engagement and economic objectives during the second round of funding and for the programme overall? This includes:
 - How does the cost-effectiveness of the GRCF compare to that of other similar programmes?
 - Which sectors and occupations have benefitted from the implementation of the programme?
 - What is the geographical distribution of the benefits of the GRCF?

1.1.1 Methodology

For this interim report, the evaluation team have undertaken the following fieldwork:

- A review of the GRCF Round 2 monitoring information to date.
- Twelve in-depth case studies with a sample of the 90 projects funded through GRCF Round 2. Case study interviews were undertaken with project staff, volunteers and participants. Where possible, evaluation staff also visited project sites to better understand projects and the types of activities that they are delivering. For case studies, a total of 23 staff interviews, 14 participant interviews, 10 volunteer interviews, and eight site visits have been undertaken.
- Nine thematic workshops with 44 projects. Each workshop focused on an environmental theme against which projects are required to deliver in their GRCF Round 2 delivery (nature conservation and restoration: habitats, nature-based solutions, or connecting people with nature), and explored the delivery of activities, the progress towards these aims and challenges faced by projects to date.

Where 'monitoring information' is referenced in this report, these data have been obtained from several sources. These include data collected from projects through the GRCF monitoring app. Projects are required to upload the following information to the app:

- **Site data** – these include all project sites and their location.
- **Job data** – these include all roles supported through GRCF Round 2, the roles' FTE, whether the role is an apprenticeship, their employer, the support offered, equalities data, the level of qualification provided (if relevant), the site on which the role is based, and its location.
- **Conservation data** – these data document the type of activity undertaken and whether any conservation activity includes the restoration or creation of habitats, tree planting, the species of trees planted, the condition of habitats, whether the area includes any designated or protected sites, the direct and indirect amount of land (in kilometres, hectares or acres) benefitting from this activity, and the location of this conservation activity.
- **Engagement data** – these include the type of engagement activity delivered, the number of events held within this, the total number of people engaged in said events, whether or not this involves any social-prescribing activity, whether this engagement targets a specific target audience, the project sites on which events have been held, and the location of the sites.
- **Infrastructure data** – these document the type of infrastructure activity that has taken place, the length of works if linear (in kilometres), the project sites on which these works have taken place, and the location of the sites.

All data collected through the monitoring app were collected by project staff. This may result in some projects submitting data in different ways or with different levels of detail. Support from the Heritage Fund Investment Managers should limit this risk; however, it has also been considered in the wider monitoring data analysis.

It is important to also note that there are four project sites operating outside of England. Whilst the GRCF has only funded project activity in England, there are a minority of instances in which monitoring data have incorrectly captured site locations in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. In interrogating the data, it has been ascertained that these are the locations of project office sites or have been inputted in error. As a result, these locations have been excluded from all analysis. Please note that locations have also been excluded where activities are hosted online, as the evaluators cannot ascertain where individuals have accessed online activities.

2. Nature Conservation and Restoration and Nature-Based Solutions

Section Summary:

Monitoring data findings (to February 2023):

- Overall, 922 sites have benefitted environmentally from GRCF Round 2 activity in England.
- GRCF Round 2 projects have directly benefitted 98,968 ha and 129 km of land across 922 sites across England.
- Works include 1,079ha and 15km of direct habitat creation and 55,731ha and 72km of direct habitat restoration. This includes the direct creation or restoration of 36km of hedgerows and 43km of rivers.
- As a direct result of GRCF Round 2 Funding, 32 projects have planted 224,620 trees.

GRCF Round 2 workshop and case study findings:

- GRCF Round 2 grants have allowed projects to undertake more in-depth ecological studies than they are typically able to do. This has helped projects to measure tangible project delivery progress.
- The flexibility provided to GRCF Round 2 projects by the Heritage Fund has allowed projects to deliver in line with local and environmental needs. This has enabled the delivery of a wide range of capital works.
- Securing landowner consent was the most common challenge identified by projects. These negotiations commonly took longer than projects anticipated, and required additional time and resources to manage.
- Whilst most projects could outline the wider impacts of their project delivery, few were able to identify immediate tangible outcomes for nature and the environment. Projects typically anticipated that it would take between two and five years for their delivery to produce measurable results.

This section of the report explores key impacts regarding nature conservation and restoration and nature-based solutions within GRCF Round 2 to date. This includes exploration of project data reported through the monitoring app, demonstrating project progress and project reflections on delivering against this theme. Reflections include exploration of the opportunities and challenges faced by projects in measuring nature-based outcomes, tangible impacts achieved and sought, and the development of knowledge and skills as a result of project delivery.

2.1 Reported Outcomes

This subsection provides an overview of the Fund’s impact through monitoring system data. This includes the land benefitting from GRCF Round 2 activity, the area benefitting from GRCF Round 2 activity, the type and condition of species targeted, and tree planting.

2.1.1 Land Benefitting from GRCF Activity

In total, 922 sites have benefitted environmentally from GRCF Round 2 activity, with 499 sites (54 per cent) including a habitat listed as a priority habitat in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan ([UK Biodiversity Action Plan: Priority Habitat Descriptions](#), 2009). Table 2.1 sets out the number of priority habitats (where given by projects), showing those habitats which can be found on 10 or more sites. For the remaining 46 per cent of projects that have not reported a priority habitat on their site, this may indicate an absence of data on the habitats, or that they are working on other types of habitat (non-BAP habitats).

Table 2.1: Number and percentage of GRCF sites which are ‘priority habitats’ (over 10 sites)

Habitat Type (UK BAP Habitat List)	Number of Sites	Percentage of Sites
Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland	170	18%
Rivers	92	10%
Lowland Meadows	74	8%
Hedgerows	68	7%
Ponds	58	6%
Coastal and Floodplain Grazing Marsh	32	3%
Wet Woodland	30	3%
Wood-Pasture & Parkland	21	2%
Lowland Heathland	16	2%
Lowland Dry Acid Grassland	14	2%
Traditional Orchards	13	1%
Lowland Calcareous Grassland	13	1%
Lowland Fens	12	1%
Reedbeds	10	1%

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=922 sites).

A large number of sites on which activity has been completed are protected or designated. Of all sites, 52 per cent had some designation or protection in place, with 14 per cent (125/922 sites) undertaking project activity on local wildlife sites and

12 per cent (107/922 sites) being classed as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). As demonstrated in Table 2.2, projects are working on a diverse range of designated or protected sites in GRCF Round 2. This demonstrates the GRCF's contribution to the 25YEP, of which restoring protected sites to a favourable condition is a key target.

Table 2.2: Sites which have a protection or designation

Type of Protection or Designation	Number of Sites	Percentage of Sites
Local Wildlife Sites	125	14%
Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)	107	12%
Local Nature Reserves (LNR)	82	9%
Protected by an Act of Parliament	50	5%
Special Protection Areas (SPA)	37	4%
Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)	34	4%
Ramsar	27	3%
National Nature Reserves (NNR)	13	1%
Marine Conservation Zones	4	0%

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=922 sites).

Amongst all GRCF Round 2 projects, 72 per cent (65/90 projects) shared the condition of the sites on which they were working, representing 551/922 sites on which conservation activity has been reported (60 per cent). Natural England categorises the condition of SSSIs as one of the following ([Natural England](#), 2013):

- favourable – habitats and features are in a healthy state and are being conserved by appropriate management;
- unfavourable (recovering condition) – if current management measures are sustained the site will recover over time;
- unfavourable (no change) or unfavourable (declining condition) – special features are not being conserved or are being lost, so without appropriate management the site will never reach a favourable or recovering condition; and
- part-destroyed or destroyed – there has been fundamental damage, where special features have been permanently lost and a favourable condition cannot be achieved.

Amongst the sites which shared their condition, 21 per cent (114/550) were described as being in a favourable condition, whilst 78 per cent (430/550 sites) were unfavourable and six sites were destroyed or part-destroyed. Of those which were in an unfavourable condition, most were noted to be recovering (215/550 sites or 39 per cent), with 135/550 sites (25 per cent) being unfavourable and showing no

change in condition, and 80/550 sites being unfavourable and declining (15 per cent).

2.1.2 Area Benefitting from GRCF Activity

To date, GRCF Round 2 projects have directly benefited 98,968 ha and 129 km of land across 922 sites across England, including both habitat creation and restoration activity. Within this area, one percent (1079/98,968 ha) involved habitat creation, 56 four per cent (55,731/98,968 ha) was habitat restoration and 2 per cent was both restoration and creation (1,494/98,968 ha). A further 41 per cent (50,664/98,968 ha) did not specify whether the land benefited was created, restored or both. The area benefited includes the direct creation or restoration of 36 km of hedgerows and 43 km of rivers.

Projects also reported indirect benefits due to GRCF Round 2 activities, impacting 80, 866 hectares and 135 km of land. In total, the direct and indirect areas of land benefited are therefore 179,834 ha and 264 km. This contributes to environmental aims within the 25YEP which seeks to create or restore 500,000 hectares of wild-life rich habitats by 2043.

Where land has been directly benefiting land this includes all project work carried out by projects, covering the area on which activities were carried out. This could be the area over which trees were planted, hedgerows were maintained or the area over which scrubland was cleared, for example. Where projects have included indirect benefits as the result of project activities, this implies there has been an additional positive impact outside of the area over which activities have been carried out. For example, this may include where benefits occurred downstream of a river due to direct works carried out, or where tree planting has created wider benefits to a surrounding area of land.

Table 2.3: Area covered by grantee projects in hectares

Type of Work	Direct	Indirect	Total	Percentage
Habitat Creation	1,079	5,889	6,969	4%
Habitat Restoration	55,731	53,846	109,576	61%
Both Creation and Restoration	1,494	18,082	19,576	11%
No Data on Type of Work	40,664	3,049	43,713	24%
Total	98,968	80,866	179,834	100%

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=922 sites). Linear features such as rivers and hedgerows were measured in kilometres and can be seen in Table 2.4 below. Please note that all figures are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Table 2.4: Area covered by grantee projects in kilometres

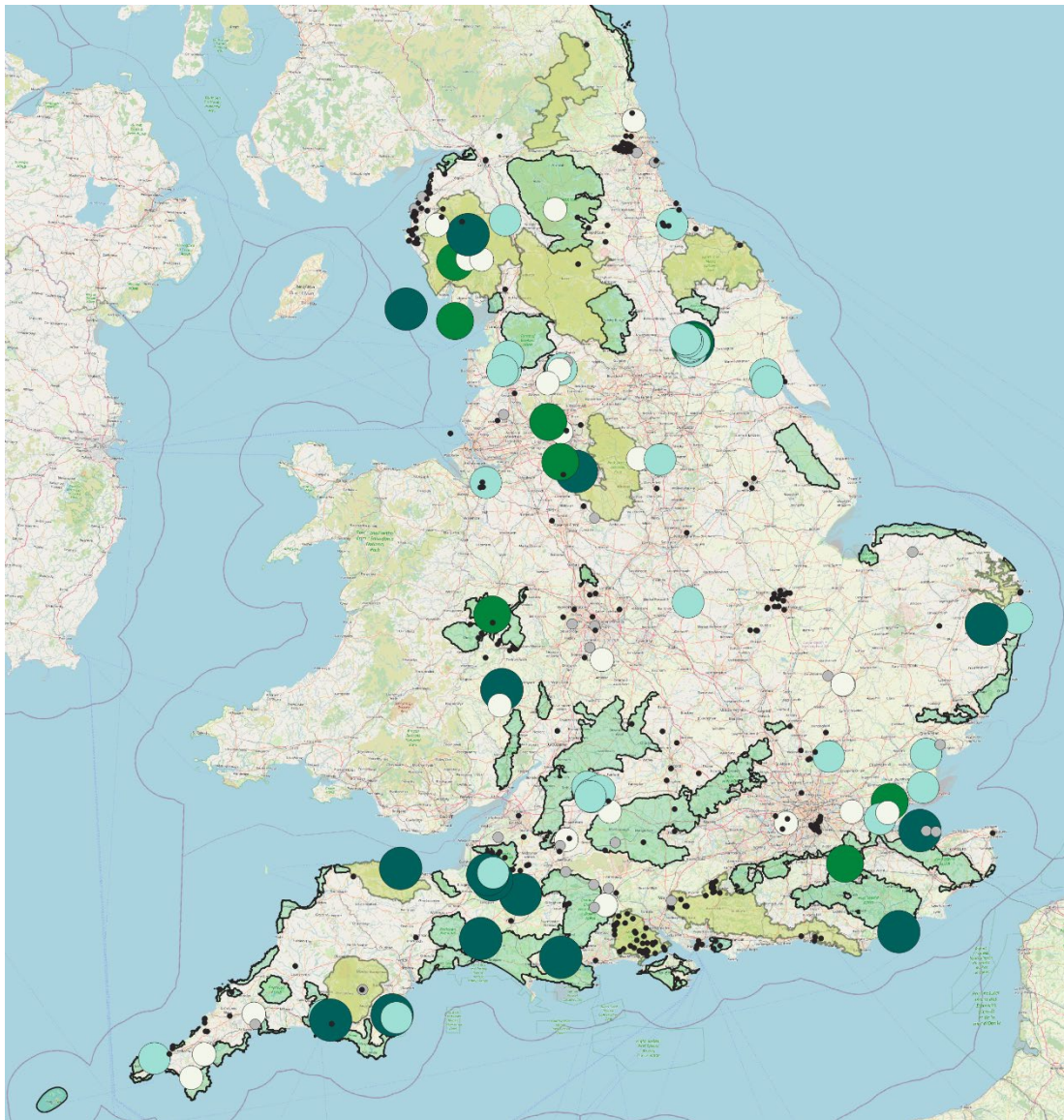
Type of Work	Direct	Indirect	Total	Percentage
Habitat Creation	15	4	19	7%
Habitat Restoration	72	84	156	59%
Both Creation and Restoration	11	48	58	22%
No Data on Type of Work	31	0	31	12%
Total	129	135	264	100%

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=922 sites). Please note that all figures are rounded to the nearest whole number.

The hectares of land improved also reflect the distribution of sites, with a large number of sites in the North West (203/922 sites), the South West (186/922 sites), and the South East (115/922 sites).

The geographical area over which projects have had direct and indirect benefit of all nature conservation and restoration activity in hectares and kilometres is also depicted in Figure 2.1 and Figure 2.2. Please note that all analysis undertaken in this report includes all project locations as provided through the GRCF Round 2 data collection app. Where maps are presented throughout this report, National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) are also displayed. This is intended to contextualise project reach and impact and illustrate project site placement alongside key areas of environmental importance across England. Projects were also able to provide the length of works if linear (in kilometres).

Figure 2.1: Geographical spread of direct and indirect benefit of all nature conservation and restoration activity in hectares



- 0 - 10
- 10 - 50
- 50 - 100
- 100 - 500
- 500 - 1000
- Over 1000 hectares
- National Parks England
- Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

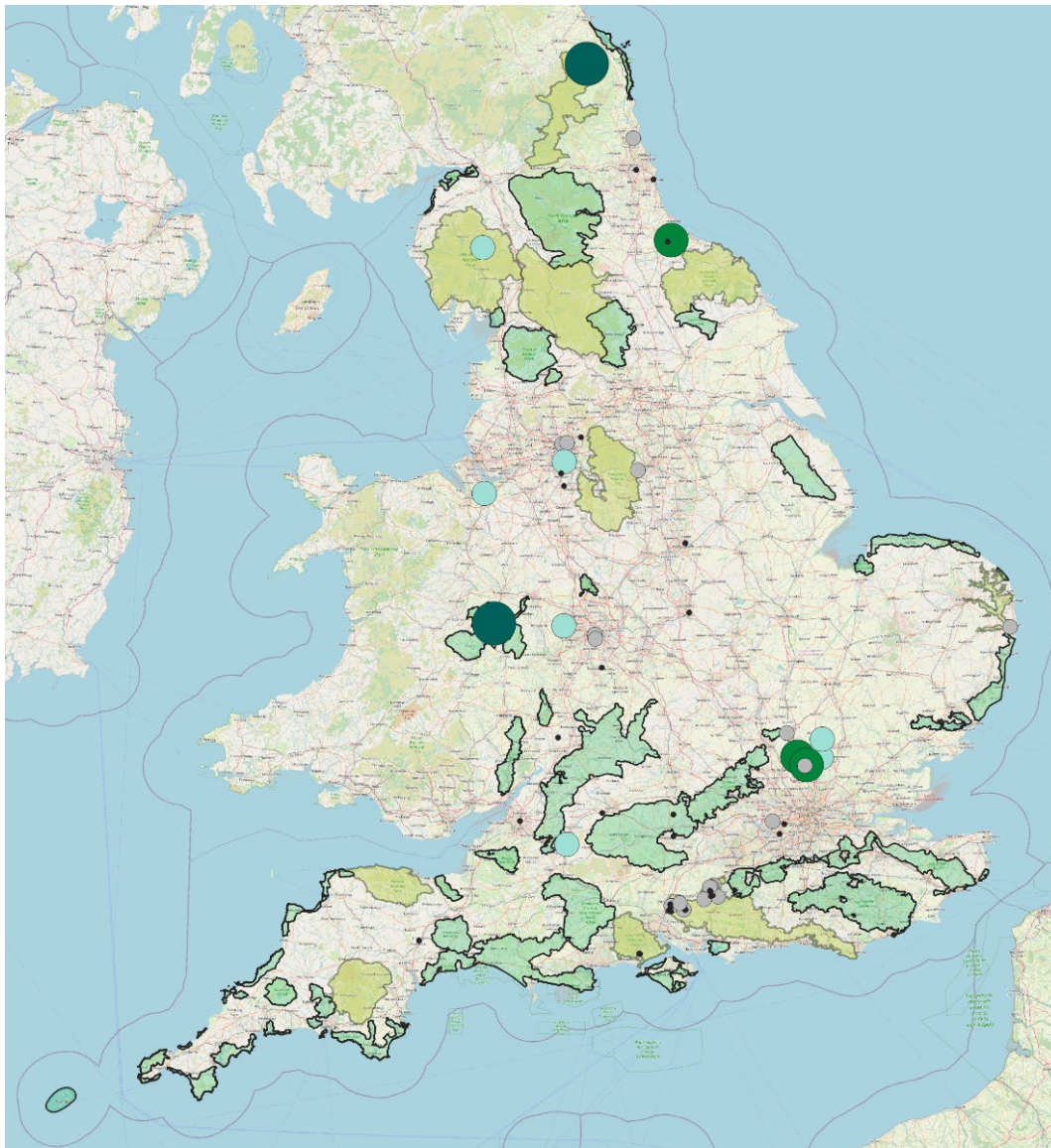
Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=922 sites).

Table 2.5: Regional spread of direct and indirect benefit of all nature conservation and restoration activity in hectares

Region	Hectares	Percentage
South East	50,566	28%
North West	49,364	27%
Yorkshire and the Humber	41,895	23%
South West	30,152	17%
East of England	4,523	3%
West Midlands	2,501	1%
North East	443	0%
East Midlands	302	0%
London	87	0%
South East	50,566	28%
Total	179,834	100%

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=922 sites).

Figure 2.2: Geographical spread of linear direct and indirect benefit of all nature conservation and restoration activity in kilometres



- 0 - 1
- 1 - 5
- 5 - 10
- 10 - 20
- Over 20 Km
- National Parks England
- Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=922 sites).

Table 2.6: Regional spread of linear direct and indirect benefit of all nature conservation and restoration activity in kilometres

Region	Kilometres	Percentage
North West	60	23%
East of England	49	19%
South West	45	17%
North East	36	14%
West Midlands	33	13%
South East	25	9%
Yorkshire and the Humber	11	4%
London	4	1%
East Midlands	1	0%
Total	264	100%

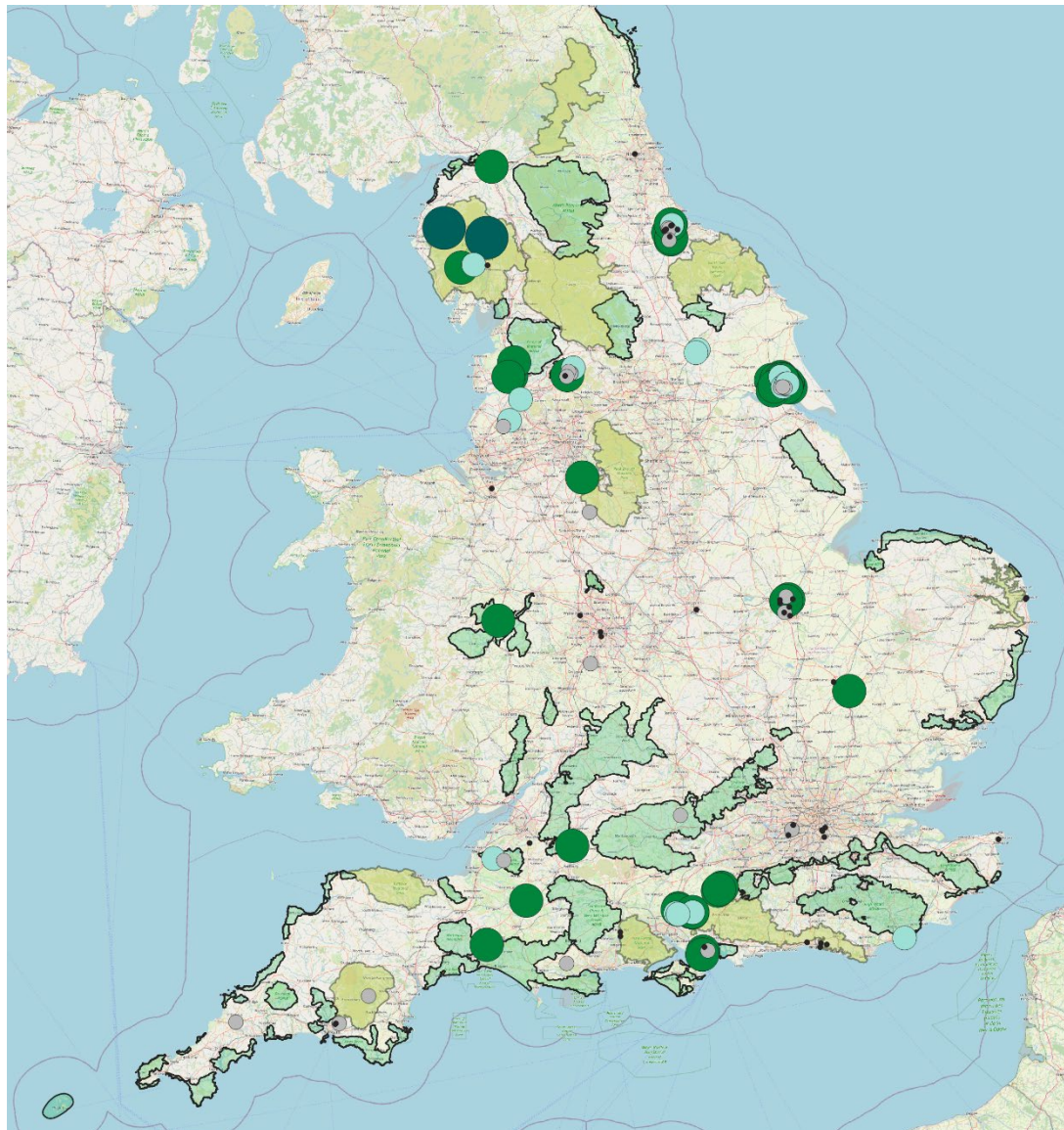
Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=922 sites).

2.1.3 Tree Planting

As a direct result of GRCF Round 2 Funding, 32 projects have planted 224,620 trees. Previous monitoring data in March 2022 suggested that 88,243 trees had been planted, which means that 136,377 trees were planted between March 2022 and January 2023.

The geographical coverage of the tree planting is demonstrated in Figure 2.3. The clusters of sites here reflect the spread of projects which have commitments to planted trees.

Figure 2.3: Geographical spread of number of trees planted (mapped onto National Park and AONB location)



- 1 - 100
- 100 - 500
- 500 - 1,000
- 1,000 - 10,000
- Over 10,000 trees
- National Parks England
- Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=224,620 trees).

There has not been a significant increase in the number of projects planting trees, which has increased from 29 projects to 32 projects since the last report. Three projects were planning to plant trees but had not planted them at the time that the monitoring data were collected. The tree-planting season in England is usually

between November and March; therefore, these data do not represent all trees planted in the 2022-2023 season, but rather only those planted before January 2023.

Table 2.7: Number of trees planted in each region

Region	Number of Trees	Percentage of Trees Planted
South West	81,735	36.4%
North West	52,438	23.3%
Yorkshire and the Humber	42,016	18.7%
South East	27,356	12.2%
North East	9,137	4.1%
East of England	7,471	3.3%
West Midlands	4,155	1.8%
London	300	0.1%
East Midlands	12	0.0%
Total	224,620	100.0%

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=224,620 trees).

2.2 Thematic Workshop Reflections

This subsection explores projects delivering against the nature conservation and restoration and nature-based solution themes' progress towards outcomes, key strengths, and challenges faced in delivery. This includes reflections on how projects have supported staff/volunteer/participant knowledge of the theme and if and how projects have identified tangible impacts.

2.2.1 Project Delivery

In workshops, projects were largely positive about their progress. Projects frequently provided examples of the conservation and restoration activities and nature-based solutions that they have successfully delivered to date. A sample of responses are detailed below:

Project responses, Workshops:

'By the end, there will be a new pond and four-and-a-half hectares of new community green and wildflower areas. We have also restored an orchard and four-and-a-half hectares of wild grass. We will also have enhanced hedgerows, reeds [and] grassland and improved canals by removing invasive species.'

'[So far we have improved] 29ha of land. [We have met our] tree-planting targets, and hedgerows have been created or enhanced.'

'We have [completed] lots of tree planting: 75,000 within [the region]. The project has provided connectivity for species so [that] they can move around in response to climate change. [The project is also working on] river-focused

things e.g. planting trees on flood plains [and] slowing the flow of water, and this is improving resilience to climate change.’

Where evidenced, project planting of trees and the restoration, development and/or maintenance of habitats were described as being mostly in line with their initial bid targets. Projects reported that this type of physical activity is helping them to develop sustainable infrastructure, allowing projects to deter and prevent climate change in numerous ways e.g. through reintroducing and protecting native species, improving water quality and management, and rewilding areas which have witnessed a detrimental human impact.

Projects involved in the nature-based solution thematic workshops frequently stated that GRCF Round 2 grants have allowed them to undertake more in-depth ecological studies than they are typically able to do. This has helped projects to measure tangible delivery progress. Securing funding to support these types of surveying activities was described by projects as being ‘traditionally difficult’, with most grants preferring to focus on physical delivery that makes changes to habitats and landscapes. Ecological surveying is a vital component of project delivery because it allows organisations to set up better infrastructure to measure their activities over the longer term, as well as ensuring that conservation and restoration work is led by evidence. Projects in these workshops praised the flexibility provided by the Heritage Fund within the GRCF, and suggested that their participation in GRCF Round 2 has enabled them to measure the impact of their work more effectively, which will be beneficial in the longer term. Further details on tangible impacts and legacies are explored in the subsection below and in [Section 5.3](#).

Projects in workshops frequently evidenced their positive progress through the completion or timely delivery of capital works. This was perceived to be possible due to the flexibility of the GRCF, which allowed projects to use a considerable proportion of their grant on capital works. Projects were particularly positive about this, suggesting that other funding streams would require them to deliver a proportion of their capital project alongside other resource-intensive activities such as school and public engagement. An example of this is documented below:

‘We are really pleased with the results of our project. Within GRCF, there was an ability to spend a large proportion of the funding on capital [works]. This [contrasts] with other funding pots which require a certain level of engagement. Whilst engagement is part of our work, especially around climate change, it takes a lot and there is also a lot of stuff that needs to be done on the ground.’ **(Workshop project response)**

Whilst a considerable proportion of GRCF Round 2 projects are delivering across a range of themes (see [Section 3](#) on Connecting People with Nature and [Section 4](#) on Resilience and Employment), projects’ ability within GRCF Round 2 to deliver what they perceived to be locally needed in order to improve the environment, as opposed to covering a range of prescribed targets, was recognised and commended. Future

funding streams should reflect on the benefits of adopting a locally led flexible approach that provides projects with the autonomy with which to deliver what is needed.

Reflecting on what has worked well in delivery to date, projects delivering against the nature conservation and restoration and nature-based solution themes reported that GRCF Round 2 has allowed them to develop more successful partnerships. Projects suggested that support from arm's-length bodies (ALB) and the Heritage Fund in bringing together local organisations with similar ideas in the initial application phase has resulted in organisations with a common goal convening to deliver projects effectively. One project stated:

'[Delivery] couldn't have gone better. The funding allowed a ground-breaking idea that had been overlooked by partners working in silos. We have been able to [collectively] weave priorities and outcomes together into policies and now we've got funding to take that [joint delivery] further.' **(Workshop project response)**

Projects delivering against the nature conservation and restoration and nature-based solution themes also described being able to build confidence and trust in new partnerships because of working together on their delivery. In some cases, projects' success with new partners through a GRCF Round 2 grant has encouraged them to work in new ways and new areas. For example, one project, predominantly based in urban areas, described successfully delivering work in rural areas for the first time due to the support received from partners. In this case, the project was exposed to engaging with a new set of stakeholders, i.e. parish councils, and could apply its typical delivery model in a new setting.

Key Challenges Faced in Project Delivery

Securing landowner consent was the most common challenge identified by projects delivering against the nature conservation and restoration and/or nature-based solution theme. Challenges included landowners changing their mind due to the long-term nature of this commitment, landowners being discouraged from engaging due to extensive paperwork, and projects identifying additional landowner consent needs that were not known about at the bidding stage. As a result of these challenges, the process took longer than anticipated and required additional time and resources to manage negotiations with landowners. Where the process was delayed, this exacerbated pressures on delivery, which projects frequently described as already being limited and pressured. Reflecting on how this challenge could be mitigated, projects suggested that they need to ensure clear and immediate communication with landowners at the point of grants being approved.

It was also suggested that project challenges in securing consent from the Environment Agency and local authorities arose because projects had to engage with several different departments. These were exacerbated by the EA's and local

authorities' limited capacity to engage. As above, to mitigate these challenges, projects suggested that they needed to be more assertive in their communication with the EA and local authorities to remind them of the commitments made at the application stage.

As suggested above, timeframes for project delivery within GRCF Round 2 were also a challenge for projects. Whilst the GRCF is a short-term and competitive fund, projects reported that once they were set up, this typically left them with less than a year to deliver. Many projects faced difficulties in delivery due to unfavourable weather conditions and suggested that the pressure to deliver was exacerbated by delivering over one cycle of seasons. Considering the outdoor setting of most projects, some activities, e.g. planting and flood management, were not possible during certain seasons and/or in poor weather conditions, e.g. heavy rain and snow. Projects also highlighted that low rainfall in the summer of 2022 was an additional barrier to planting and river- and lake-based activities and may have had an impact on the number of volunteers willing to engage.

The final key challenge identified in workshops was centred on communication. This commonly included communication with local residents and sub-contractors. Projects suggested that challenges arose when local residents were not aware of project delivery and, as a result, were not supportive of physical works being delivered. One project stated:

'We had one location where we were putting debris in a stream, which we then got complaints about on Facebook, as they didn't understand why we were doing it (despite public consultation). [We] managed to meet them and calm them down. We learnt how quickly [...] things can escalate.' **(Workshop project response)**

To overcome this concern, projects suggested that a range of information, accessible to different groups, is needed early on in a project's delivery to ensure that local people feel informed and have opportunities to become involved in the works. Where possible, a small number of projects suggested that this would encourage more of the general public to engage with project delivery where appropriate. This aligns with the 25YEP's aim to encourage more people, from all backgrounds, to engage with and spend time in green and blue spaces in their everyday lives.

Similarly, projects also reported delays due to working with sub-contractors who were not familiar with nature-based solutions and how they need to be implemented. A minority of projects stated that sub-contractor plans or designs were at times not fit for purpose due to their limited knowledge of what a nature-based solution is. As a result, most projects facing this challenge had to provide greater support for sub-contractors or change sub-contractors part-way through, leading to project delays:

‘There are snags; we knew that. It is nature; we can’t control it. The big thing for us is that we know what a nature-based solution is, but it is hard getting other people to know this, too. Our first designer didn’t seem to know this. They were going all over the place [trying to fix issues surrounding the design]. We ended up changing designer, which was an interesting process, but they caught on and it’s in.’ **(Workshop project response)**

This suggests that when engaging different sub-contractor sectors, eNGOs should consider potential skills gaps and training needs to ensure that collaboration is productive and reflects environmental needs.

2.2.2 Education and Skills

Projects offered a multitude of examples demonstrating how they have supported staff, trainees and volunteers with technical training that would allow them to take part in and sustain nature conservation and restoration activities. This included training in using specific equipment and tools, from chainsaws and other outdoor equipment to GIS and other data-driven devices. Furthermore, projects highlighted that staff, trainees and volunteers have undertaken a range of more generic training, e.g. first aid and safety courses. Technical training and general training have allowed projects to upskill existing staff, let them explore new areas of interest, ensure that trainees can effectively develop skills that will be transferrable to other environmental roles post-project, and allow volunteers to develop knowledge and a bespoke set of skills regarding particular nature conservation and restoration and/or nature-based solutions. A minority of projects reflected that, whilst they had offered traineeships or internships previously, this was the first time that skills specific to nature conservation and restoration had been at the forefront of their training plans. In these cases, projects reflected that this has been a key benefit of GRCF Round 2, as it has ensured that individuals entering the sector are learning valuable and sector-specific skills. Examples of this are detailed below:

Project responses, Workshops:

‘Developing training programmes has been something else [within this project]. We had some [traineeship schemes] in place before now, but they were more aimed at employability. This has been training in planting trees, hedgerows, etc. Training in this has been a really valuable output and very different from CV writing.’

‘[It has contributed to the] legacy. We’ve done a lot of training in traditional rural skills, hedge laying, etc. Seeing people use these skills in other settings is always great. Payoff always comes further down the line — just takes a while to see effects.’ **(Workshop project response)**

The range of training on offer has encouraged the legacy and sustainability of activity beyond the lifetime of a project. Additionally, the training has provided new skill

development opportunities for a range of individuals engaging with GRCF projects, resulting in many cases in increased staff/trainee/volunteer confidence and tangible skill development. This will be considered further in [Section 4](#) on Resilience and Employment.

Through delivery, projects have been able to facilitate wider education and information sharing regarding nature conservation and restoration and nature-based solution activities to volunteers and the general public (for further details on this, please see [Section 3.1.1](#)). In workshops, most projects reported offering a range of informal sessions to educate others on the nature the project is working on and how they are looking to support it through project delivery. These have included guided walks, educational talks, citizen science events, and taster days. Said activities have allowed volunteers and the general public to develop a better understanding of the natural environment around them, encouraged a greater appreciation of biodiversity, and provided them with the knowledge and tools with which to support local nature. Moreover, projects have undertaken a wide range of educational outreach with schools, community groups, and other local networks. Providing local people and groups with information and knowledge regarding the conservation, restoration, and nature-based solutions undertaken through GRCF project delivery has encouraged locally driven planning to ensure that project work is valued and sustained by its local network. One project stated:

‘Our project is very community-based. The vast majority of our engagement is long-term through schools [and] community groups and leaders. We invest [in] setting up a network and train them to later manage themselves after our support stops, but we are hoping to still support them afterwards, which we are seeking more funding for.’ **(Workshop project response)**

This aligns with wider 25YEP ambitions to engage the public with green and blue spaces and educate them on conservation.

2.2.3 Measuring Tangible Outcomes

Whilst most projects in workshops could outline the longer-term impacts that they can foresee occurring because of their project delivery, few were able to identify outcomes for nature and the environment that are fully realised in the shorter term. This is unsurprising, given that conservation and restoration activities and nature-based solutions typically take time to develop and yield measurable results (as they are dependent on a growing cycle).

Where projects were able to identify tangible outcomes, these outcomes were anticipated to strengthen over time. For example, one project removed a weir and witnessed a positive impact on fish populations in the area. This has positively impacted nature in the short term but is anticipated to have a greater positive impact in the longer term. Other projects were similarly able to visually identify where delivery had made physical changes to the landscape, which would provide positive

outcomes for nature and the environment over time, e.g. through wood clearing, tree planting, and maintenance within public green spaces. In these cases, projects felt that they were early stages of their journey, with positive outcomes for nature and the environment emerging over time:

‘There are no immediate or tangible outcomes, as it takes a while for these things to happen. We’ve been harvesting seeds, so flowers will grow this year but won’t flower until at least 2024, so to assess the area you need to have been there for five years or so. Short-term outcomes arise from planting some plants which should flower this year, but a lot of the site is focused on the longer term.’ **(Workshop project response)**

Across workshops, projects typically anticipated that it would take between two and five years for their delivery to produce clear, measurable results for nature and the environment.

As reported above, many projects were able to undertake baseline surveys of their environments due to GRCF Round 2 grants. To identify whether tangible outcomes have occurred, however, many projects reflected in workshops that they would need to undertake further longitudinal surveys post-project. Whilst a minority of projects have sufficient funding to undertake longitudinal surveys, most are reliant on volunteers or securing additional funding to be able to ascertain their long-term contributions to greater biodiversity, conservation and restoration.

Overall, many projects were able to provide ‘a snapshot’ of the impact that their projects are having and will continue to have on nature and the environment. In most cases, this includes physical changes to the landscape and/or infrastructure installed. However, whilst most projects are positive about the wider outcomes that they will see in the future, it is also important to consider that organisational staff and volunteers will need to continue with longitudinal surveys to identify long-term outcomes for nature and the environment. To ensure that the impact of funded project delivery is comparable on a wider scale and to allow organisations to prioritise particular impact measures, future provision should look to offer additional support and guidance around the long-term monitoring of project impact.

3. Connecting People with Nature

Section Summary:

Monitoring data findings (to February 2023):

- Overall, 104,750 people have engaged with 6,329 events held throughout GRCF Round 2 across England to date.
- Of all events, 90 were confirmed to have been held online, accounting for 1,306 engagements.
- A wide range of infrastructure has been installed or improved, with 36 projects detailing works carried out over 174 sites.

GRCF Round 2 workshop and case study findings:

- Many projects have successfully employed citizen science methods in their GRCF Round 2 project delivery. This has helped individuals to understand the importance of long-term engagement (rather than ad hoc activity participation).
- Projects in workshops found that investment in transport was particularly useful when targeting groups with limited access to nature.
- Projects found value in sharing learning and supporting community engagement collectively. GRCF Round 2 has enabled projects to strengthen existing partnerships and align with the needs of local community organisations with regard to neighbourhood plans and the needs of the area.

This section of the report outlines key impacts regarding connecting people with nature, as reported by projects, and will explore project reflections with respect to this theme.

3.1 Reported Outcomes

This subsection will provide an overview of the Fund's impact through monitoring system data. This includes engagement with project activity as well as improved or installed visitor infrastructure.

As highlighted in [Section 1.2](#), there are a minority of instances in which monitoring data have incorrectly captured site locations in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. In interrogating the data, it has been ascertained that these are the locations of project office sites or have been inputted in error. As a result, these locations have been excluded from all analysis.

3.1.1 Engagement with Project Activity

In total, 104,750 people have engaged with 6,329 events held throughout GRCF Round 2 to date. These figures exclude those events which were registered as social media engagements, which will be reported separately, but include those who attended events online. Subsequent reports will explore levels of engagement as well as engagement types in greater detail.

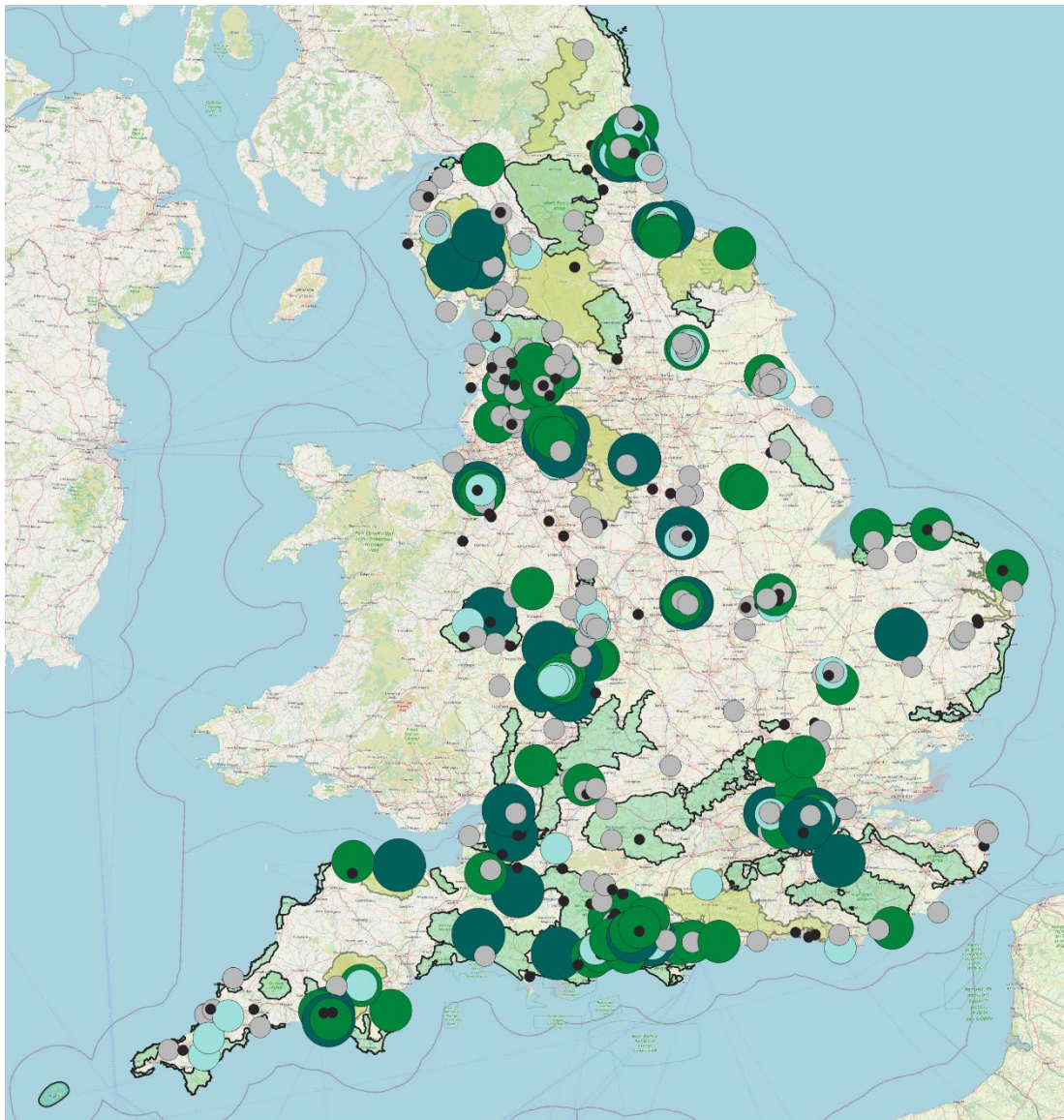
Table 3.1: Number of people engaging with events by region

Region	In Person	Online	Total	Percentage of People
North West	23,678	4,362	28,040	27%
South West	12,052	1,886	13,938	13%
North East	12,698	48	12,746	12%
South East	12,019	200	12,219	12%
Yorkshire and the Humber	5,082	7,038	12,120	12%
West Midlands	8,808	234	9,042	9%
East of England	4,981	1,344	6,325	6%
East Midlands	4,839	1,094	5,933	6%
London	4,302	85	4,387	4%
Total	88,459	16,291	104,750	100%

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=104,750 people).

The geographical spread of people engaged in person is illustrated in Figure 3.1 below.

Figure 3.1: Number of people engaged in in-person events, (shown by location and mapped onto National Park and AONB location)



- Up to 10
- 10 - 50
- 100 - 500
- 50 - 100
- Over 500 people
- National Parks England
- Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=88,459 people). Please note that this includes all in-person engagements.

Almost half of all events were described as targeting a specific group (45 per cent; 2850/6329). Some engagement activities were targeted at particular groups who might be less likely to engage with nature, including people from deprived

backgrounds, people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET), people from Black, Asian or Minoritised Ethnic Communities, asylum seekers, people with disabilities or poor mental health, and women (People and Nature Survey, Natural England, 2022). Table 3.2 below sets out the number of engagement activities which were targeted at one or more of these groups. Notably, 15 per cent (958/6,329) of events targeted people from a deprived background or NEET, with a further 12 per cent (774/6,329) targeting people with disabilities or long-term health conditions.

Table 3.2: Number of events targeting groups

Target Groups	No. of Events	Percentage of All Events
Deprived Backgrounds/NEET	958	15%
People with Disabilities or Long-Term Health Conditions	774	12%
People with Poor Mental Health	574	9%
Asylum Seekers/Refugees	452	7%
Black, Asian or Minoritised Ethnic Communities	59	6%
Women	28	1%
Caring Responsibilities	5	<1%

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=6,329 events). NB: a number of people have not been included in this table because it cannot be confirmed whether all people who attended these events represented the aforementioned target groups.

Engagement activities were held across the regions of the UK, with 1,574 engagement activities happening in the North West and 1,390 in the South West.

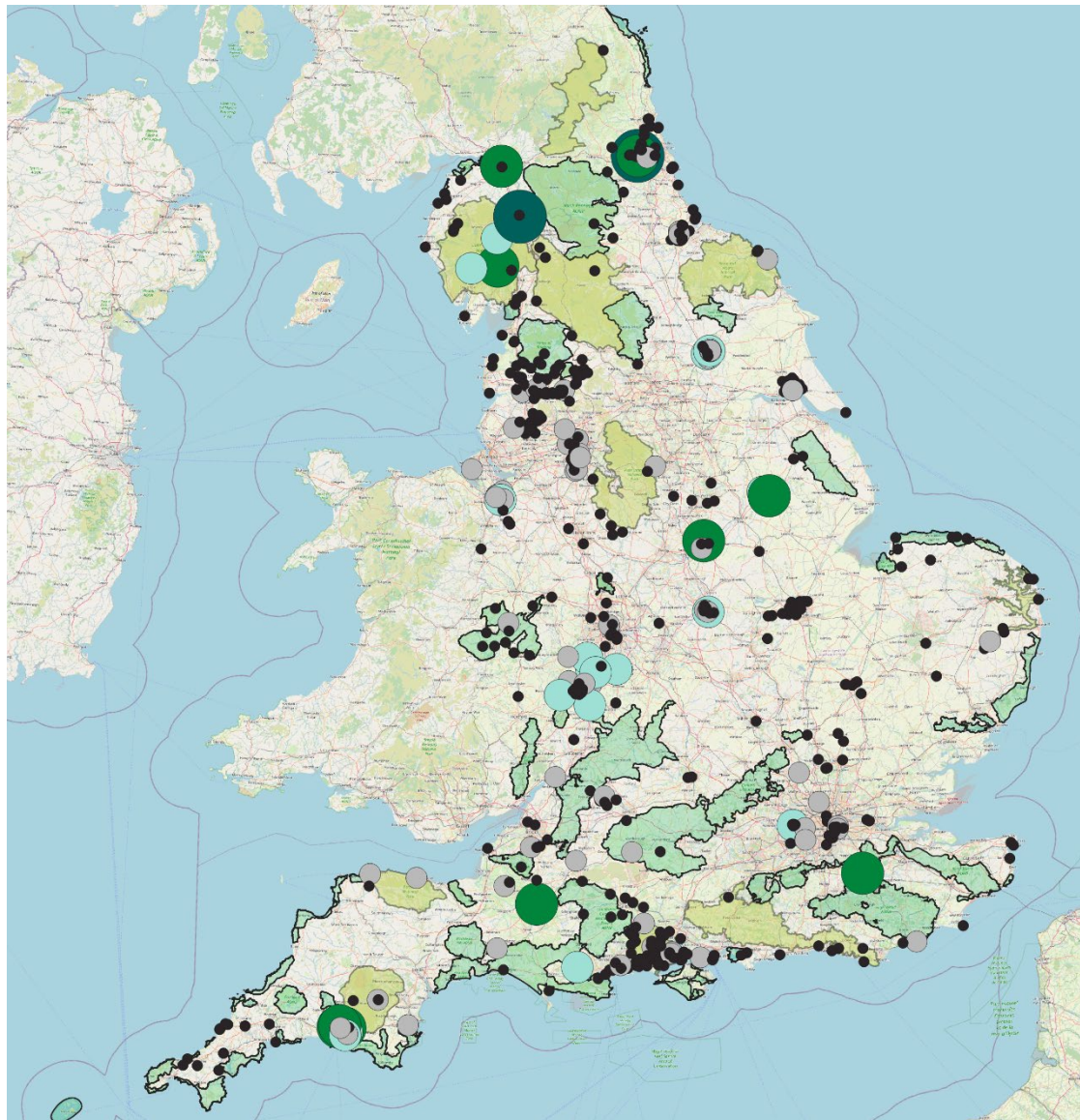
Table 3.3: Number of engagement activities by region (including in-person and online)

Region	Engagement Activities	Percentage of Activities
South West	1,390	22%
North West	1,574	25%
South East	448	7%
Yorkshire and the Humber	335	5%
East of England	276	4%
West Midlands	717	11%
North East	856	14%
London	243	4%
East Midlands	490	8%
Total	6,329	100%

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=6,329 engagement activities).

The geographical spread of events held as part of GRCF Round 2 projects is illustrated in Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2: Number of in-person and online events held in GRCF Round 2 projects (shown by location and mapped onto National Park and AONB location)



- Up to 10
- 10 - 50
- 50 - 100
- 100 - 200
- Over 200 events
- National Parks England
- Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=6,329 events).

Amongst these events, 90 were confirmed to have been held online, accounting for 1,306 people (see Table 3.4). These events included online training sessions and webinars. Projects also reported 78 social media engagements, which accounted for 65,906 people¹.

The most common types of events were those which involved conservation work (2,418 events) such as tree planting or hedge laying, scrub clearance, or community litter-picking days. Equally, 944 events involved some element of training, such as workshops on particular species or training in particular skills for either volunteers, schoolchildren, or members of the public.

Table 3.4: Number of events by type

Event Type	No. of Events	Percentage of Events
Conservation Work (Tree Planting/Hedge Laying)	2,481	39%
Workshops/Training	944	15%
School Events	862	14%
Guided Walks/Talks	766	12%
Regular Events (e.g. Volunteer Meetings, Clubs)	725	11%
Activity Days (Family)	356	6%
Citizen Science Projects	161	3%
Online Events	90	1%
Other	307	5%
Detail Not Given	639	10%
Total	6,329	100%

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=6,329 events).

3.1.2 Visitor Infrastructure Installed or Improved

A wide range of infrastructure has been installed or improved, with 36 projects detailing works carried out over 174 sites, totalling 203 elements of infrastructure. Table 3.5 below details the type of infrastructure either installed or improved.

¹ NB: the total figure for events and people excludes social media engagements.

Table 3.5: Amount of infrastructure installed or improved

Infrastructure	Infrastructure Count
Footpaths	69
Fences	26
Signage or Interpretation	18
Bridges	15
Accessibility Changes (e.g. Vehicle Accessibility, Ramps or Rails)	13
Boardwalks	13
Amenities (e.g. Transport Infrastructure, Toilets, Catering)	10
Shelters or Hides	6

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=203 elements of infrastructure).

In addition, 33 sites registered ‘Other’ types of infrastructure, which included improvements to dry-stone walls and viewing platforms and the installation of technology such as a footfall counter and webcams. Projects which noted improving accessibility to sites included extending car parks to improve disability access, improving entrance ways, or creating seating and raised planters.

3.2 Thematic Workshop Reflections

This subsection outlines key themes regarding impacts and outcomes identified within the connecting people with nature thematic workshops. This includes exploration of project progress towards outcomes, key strengths, and challenges faced in delivery, as well as how projects have supported staff/volunteer/participant knowledge of the theme.

3.2.1 Project Delivery

Within workshops, projects were confident that the GRCF Round 2 has supported their delivery in connecting people with nature. Projects are commonly delivering on multiple themes and they felt that connecting people with nature provided a domino effect, wherein nature connectedness encouraged individuals to become involved in conservation and restoration activities. Examples of project successes in connecting people with nature include:

Project responses, Workshops:

‘We’ve connected with hard-to-reach groups, been on local news, [and] connected with farmers who have engaged with participants.’

‘We’re doing three tree ID guides, 5,000 copies, and that’s been to 2,025 individuals. Over 500 groups are engaged, so that’s about 11,000 people. So I think the reach of our project had been quite high.’

‘We’re seeing children regularly and they see this as an extension of their classroom and they’re able to take ownership of the forest. Also, we’re undertaking evaluations with some of our original schools to show behaviour change.’

‘Our partners didn’t really have a lot of experience of engaging the community in tree planting. One thing that’s been really successful is them getting the community to take ownership over their space and people feeling more protective over it.’

Projects also frequently reported that they have observed a greater appreciation of nature since COVID-19, therefore making it easier to facilitate nature connectedness activity. This is supported by the 2022 People and Nature Survey, which found that four in 10 adults in England feel that nature is more important now to their well-being, along with more than half reporting spending more time outdoors in 2022 than they did before the pandemic ([People and Nature Survey](#), Natural England).

Many projects have successfully employed citizen science methods in their GRCF Round 2 project delivery. In workshops, projects reported that this has supported the management of nature moving forward and resulted in individuals understanding the importance of long-term engagement. Similarly, projects with specialist citizen science staff have benefitted from staff sharing their enthusiasm with partners and subsequently engaging them. For example, these staff members have supported the recruitment of community members to engage in citizen science activities. Projects evidenced this through repeated visits, indicating a successful connection as well as feelings of community ownership of the space, which supports project legacy.

Projects also found that communities need to be ‘brought with you’ to positively engage local people. In some cases, this meant ensuring that capital works and their benefits were visible and accessible, whilst in others, this meant working closely with local groups to ensure that delivery worked within existing infrastructure. Projects interviewed for in-depth case studies also reported that when engaging new groups and individuals, it is important to consider what is already available locally to see where GRCF Round 2 projects could support and enhance existing activity (rather than duplicate it).

For one project, there has been considerable benefit from working with existing ‘Friends of’ groups, supplying them with additional tools and resources to carry out their own citizen science activities to monitor biodiversity in a specific location. As this has been supported by an existing network, the project believes that it is likely that these activities will be sustained post-GRCF Round 2.

Projects in workshops found that investment in transport was particularly useful when targeting groups with limited access to nature, e.g. minibuses to travel to activities. Projects highlighted that groups and schools often do not have the resources to travel to project sites, particularly in more remote rural areas. Examples include the provision of travel for older age groups and those from more deprived areas, whom projects felt would not have engaged otherwise. Projects explained that providing accessible transport makes it easier for people to engage with projects and, therefore, to connect with nature. Overall, projects reported that the provision of grant funding to directly support connections to nature has helped them to be more inclusive in their offer.

Where projects have established new working relationships, lessons have also been learnt. A minority of projects reported in workshops that when connecting people with nature, making partner contributions visible is crucial. This was important for two key reasons. Firstly, visible partner contributions ensured parity and appreciation between partners. Projects reported that the pressure to deliver could risk a lack of appreciation for the network of organisations involved. Secondly, the visibility of partner contributions also encourages accountability, making it clear how different organisations contribute to a wider whole project.

3.2.2 Key Challenges

Those attending nature-connection-focused workshops experienced similar challenges to those attending other workshops, with tight timescales commonly exacerbating identified challenges. A minority of projects cited ongoing issues surrounding rural engagement due to poor transport links and difficulty in encouraging those from urban areas to engage with rural sites. This was particularly challenging where projects were looking to enhance the accessibility of projects to a range of diverse groups:

‘Our area is one of high deprivation, so we do try to make sessions as accessible as possible, but there are always issues. Some of our sites are not very accessible, e.g. 15-min walk, which is a barrier.’ **(Workshop project response)**

Projects also felt that there was often a requirement of a balance between reducing the accessibility of sites when carrying out capital works as well as increasing the accessibility to encourage and facilitate community engagement. For example, there was a requirement to shut off areas of the project site whilst completing nature restoration activities, but, at the same time, some projects felt that this contradicted the ability to improve nature connection because some access is shut off for a period of time.

As a result of the range of issues surrounding access to sites, a minority of projects were unsure as to whether they were effectively engaging with a diverse range of groups. Whilst the GRCF Round 2 has presented opportunities to widen their reach

and increase diversity, projects noted that it takes time to engage and build trust with gatekeeper organisations representing diverse groups. Although the timeframe of the GRCF Round 2 funding is limited, projects have used a range of different approaches to help overcome this challenge. Projects noted the importance of offering varied ways of connecting with nature, e.g. offering sessions after school time and on weekends. Projects also delivered engagement online and provided resources for individuals to use in their own time, at home or in a more suitable than the project site.

Whilst the benefits of citizen science were widely felt by projects, a few also highlighted that they faced challenges with this approach. In particular, some projects found it difficult to collect the volume of data required whilst retaining the 'joy' of the session for volunteers. Project staff explained that it could be difficult to encourage volunteers to carry out data collection activities because this could feel like an arduous task in comparison to others.

3.2.3 Impact of GRCF

Projects in connecting people with nature workshops found that the GRCF Round 2 has enabled greater partnership working and sharing of resources. Projects found value in sharing learning and supporting community engagement collectively. This was seen to be particularly valuable, given the wider capacity constraints. GRCF Round 2 has enabled projects to strengthen existing partnerships and align with the needs of local community organisations with regard to neighbourhood plans and the needs of the area.

There has been a notable impact on the well-being of those involved, as projects have enabled people to get outside and connect with others in their community through nature. In addition, projects have witnessed a growing confidence in those engaging, along with a feeling of empowerment, which can be seen as a long-term impact of the Fund.

Projects specifically noted the impact on young people's well-being after engaging through either employment or participation in GRCF Round 2 activities. This has reportedly had lasting effects in which young people are more willing to look after their own environment and engage with nature, whilst also diversifying the current volunteer pool. Linked to this, projects felt that there was now a wider pool of individuals with a deeper understanding of green job opportunities, increasing the likelihood that those individuals will engage with the sector in the future.

Whilst diverse engagement was noted as being a challenge, several projects indicated that they previously could not engage with community organisations at all. The GRCF has provided the opportunity to begin this relationship-building process. Specifically, GRCF Round 2 has enabled engagement with pre-existing community groups to support nature connectedness. For example, there has been value in

including educational elements in the project, as this helps to engage school groups. For some, this included engaging with social-prescribing provision and engaging those at risk of NEET through educational visits. What is more, this supports longstanding nature connectedness, as individuals then learn about their immediate environment through tools funded through the project, contributing to behaviour change post-GRCF:

'I think a major success has been the engagement with community groups [because] they know what works for people, as they have the pre-existing knowledge and experience in doing nature-related activities with their local community.' **(Workshop project response)**

Whilst projects involved with this workshop were centred on connecting with nature, projects noted that the GRCF Round 2 has enabled the delivery of capital works, which supports future delivery through providing better facilities for connecting with nature.

4. Resilience and Employment

Section Summary:

Monitoring data findings (to February 2023):

- GRCF Round 2 has led to 706 roles being supported within 89 out of the 90 projects. These are equivalent to 484.2 FTE jobs.
- Of these roles, 482 were created for the GRCF (68 per cent), 128 are existing roles protected from redundancy (18 per cent), and 92 roles involve partial support with full cost recovery (13 per cent).
- Where new roles have been created, equalities data suggest that 32 per cent (154/482 roles) of recruits have been aged 25 years or below and nine per cent (43/482) are noted to be socioeconomically disadvantaged.
- In total, 138 apprenticeship roles were created. Monitoring data suggest that 38 roles are Kickstart positions and a further 24 are entry-level apprenticeships.

GRCF Round 2 workshop and case study findings:

- Project feedback on recruitment was mixed in workshops. On the one hand, projects were largely able to successfully recruit for their GRCF Round 2 roles or find alternative solutions where roles were left unfilled.
- Whilst more is needed to ensure diversity within the sector, GRCF grants provided space and resources for projects to reflect on how to recruit inclusively and sustainably.
- Challenges in staff and trainee recruitment typically stemmed from perceived short delivery times, temporary contracts, and competition from other GRCF Round 2 projects when recruiting. Projects frequently commended the flexibility afforded to them by the GRCF in these scenarios.

This section of the report outlines key impacts regarding resilience and employment, as reported by projects, and will explore project reflections with regard to this theme.

4.1 Reported Outcomes

This subsection will provide an overview of the Fund's impact through monitoring system data. This includes a review of data regarding job creation and safeguarding, skills, and training.

4.1.1 Job Creation and Safeguarding

In total, 706 job opportunities have been supported within 89 out of the 90 GRCF Round 2 projects. These are equivalent to 484.2 FTE jobs. Amongst these 706 roles, 482 have been created for the GRCF Round 2 (68 per cent), 128 are existing roles protected from redundancy (18 per cent), and 92 roles involve partial support with full cost recovery (13 per cent).

Table 4.1 sets out the regional breakdown of jobs supported through the GRCF, which reflects the geographical locations of projects and sites. It should be noted that projects documented five jobs within Wales or Scotland that had been supported. As the GRCF requires all activity to occur in England, it is assumed that said projects have head offices in Scotland or Wales but are delivering GRCF projects specifically in England; however, these have not been included in the final figures.

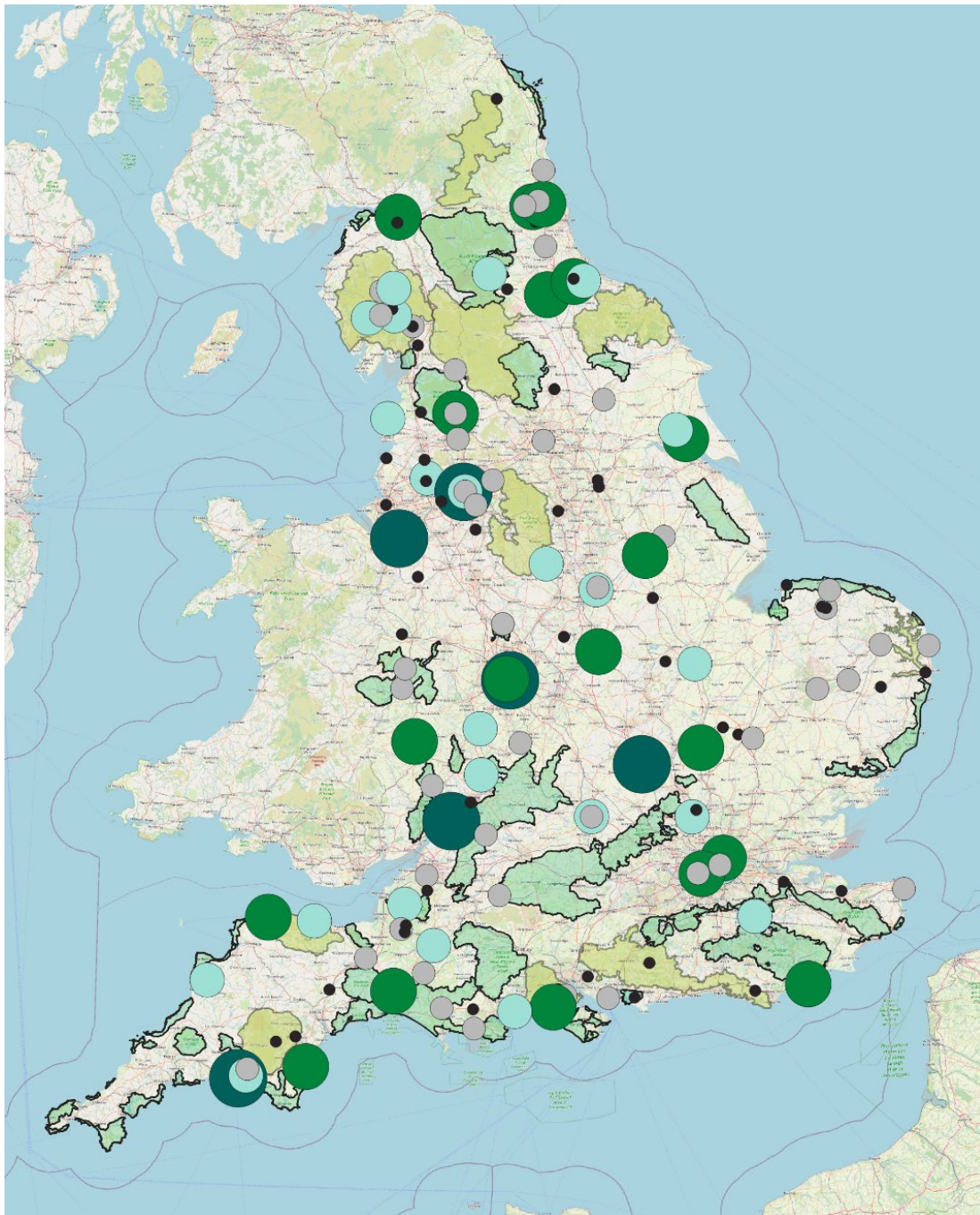
Table 4.1: Regional breakdown of job roles supported

Regional Breakdown	Total FTE	Role Created for GRCF	Existing Role Protected from Redundancy	Partial Support – Full Cost Recovery	Total roles	Percentage
South West	119	120	37	19	178	25%
North West	110	100	21	23	144	20%
North East	51	50	25	6	82	12%
South East	48	53	19	4	76	11%
West Midlands	53	56	7	12	76	11%
East of England	36	37	3	9	49	7%
East Midlands	25	22	7	11	40	6%
Yorkshire and the Humber	21	26	4	5	35	5%
London	22	18	5	3	26	4%
Total	484	482	128	92	706	100%

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=706 jobs). NB: the 'Total' column also includes the four jobs where data were not given on whether they were jobs created, retained or partially supported.

The geographical coverage of FTE posts supported is illustrated in Figure 4.1. This map demonstrates a more even spread of locations across the country.

Figure 4.1: Number of FTE posts supported (shown by location and mapped onto National Park and AONB location)

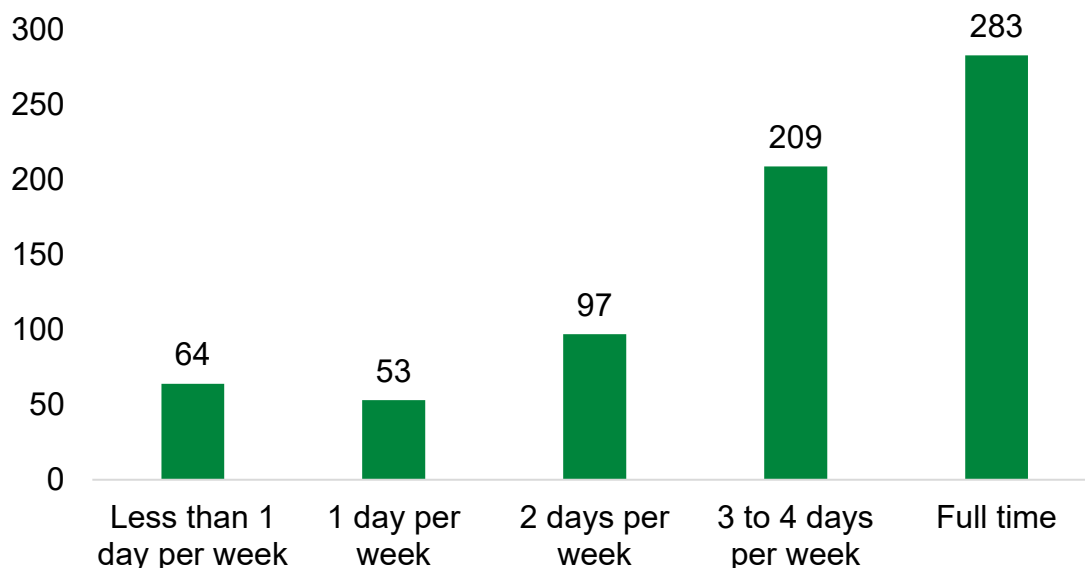


- Up to 1 FTE role
- 1 - 3
- 3 - 5
- 5 - 10
- Over 10 FTE roles
- National Parks England
- Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=706 jobs).

The jobs supported by GRCF Round 2 projects had a range of working hours, with 40 per cent of roles being full-time (283/706 roles) and 29 per cent being posts that were three to four days per week (209/706 roles).

Figure 4.2: Working pattern of jobs supported through GRCF Round 2



Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=706 jobs).

Table 4.2 below sets out the main Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) of roles which have been supported. This reflects the range of roles within the wider sector, with the largest group 'agricultural and fishing trades' (94 roles total) comprising of rangers (61 roles), countryside rangers (13 roles), and mature reserve wardens (12 roles).

Table 4.2: SOC group of roles supported for GRCF (over 10 jobs)

SOC Group	Roles
Agricultural and Fishing Trades Not Elsewhere Classified (NEC)	94
Project Support Officers	86
Youth and Community Workers	58
Business and Financial Project Management Professionals	54
Conservation Professionals	45
Other Administrative Occupations NEC	19
Welfare and Housing Associate Professionals NEC	17
Business and Related Research Professionals	14
Environmental Professionals	11
Natural and Social Science Professionals NEC	10

Source: GRCF Round 2 monitoring information (n=706 jobs).

Where new roles have been created, equalities data suggest that 32 per cent (154/482 roles) of recruits have been aged 25 years or below and nine per cent (43/482) are noted to be socioeconomically disadvantaged. Additionally, 19 are Black, Asian or Minoritised Ethnic Communities (four per cent), 15 have a disability or long-term health condition (three per cent), and 13 are from the LGBTQ+ communities (three per cent). Equalities data was given for 60 per cent of the roles, where the 32 per cent (154/482 roles) the response was not known and 9 per cent was left blank (41/482 roles). It is important to note that across the sector, 4.8 per cent of 'environmental professionals' identify as Black, Asian or Minoritised Ethnic Communities (in comparison to 12.6 per cent of individuals across all other UK professions ([Racial diversity in environment professions](#), SOS-UK, 2022)). Whilst GRCF Round 2 is looking to support diversity within the sector, additional efforts will be needed to achieve this.

4.1.2 Skills and Training

Monitoring data suggest that 138 apprenticeship roles were created. Where projects have given further detail on the nature of these apprenticeships, it appears that 55 roles are Kickstart positions and a further 23 are entry-level apprenticeships. Seven roles are listed as Level 2 roles (equivalent to GCSE level) and a further seven as Level 3 roles (equivalent to A Level).

The Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) groups of these apprenticeship roles demonstrate the range of opportunities offered as part of the GRCF. These include a considerable number of agricultural roles (such as rangers and nature reserve wardens), community/youth work roles (such as youth workers and outreach workers), as well as other technical roles (such as conservationists/environmentalists, marine advisers, laboratory assistants, and communications or admin assistants).

4.2 Thematic Workshop Reflections

This subsection outlines key themes regarding impacts and outcomes identified within thematic workshops with projects. This includes project reflections on recruitment and if and how the GRCF Round 2 has improved the resilience of their organisations.

Reflections summarised in this section cover all workshops related to nature conservation and restoration, nature-based solutions, and connecting people with nature. Furthermore, several workshop attendees were employed as part of the project. In some cases, they felt less able to comment on recruitment processes and/or the longer-term resilience of the organisations in question. However, many of said staff did indicate that their roles had been made permanent prior to the end of the project, whereby indicating a long-term positive impact.

4.2.1 Staff Recruitment

Project feedback on recruitment was mixed in workshops. On the one hand, projects were largely able to successfully recruit for their GRCF Round 2 roles or find alternative solutions where roles were left unfilled. However, projects also faced challenges in securing a diverse range of staff and retaining those whom they supported. Most projects involved in thematic workshops felt that GRCF Round 2 had helped to create new roles within their organisations and secure existing roles, including saving some roles from redundancy and contributing to more sustainable employment:

‘We recruited three new roles and supported some existing roles as well. All went well. We are really happy with who [was] recruited and kept.’

(Workshop project response)

Where projects faced challenges in their recruitment, they frequently commended the flexibility afforded to them within GRCF Round 2 by the Heritage Fund. Where roles could not be filled, GRCF grants allowed projects to employ contractors to ensure that delivery remained on track. In addition, projects were able to make changes to their GRCF staff roles and/or the timescale of their recruitment where required. This flexibility throughout project delivery has allowed projects to respond accordingly to their own organisational and delivery needs.

Whilst more is needed to ensure diversity within the sector, GRCF grants provided space and resources for projects to reflect on how to recruit inclusively and sustainably. Many projects reported that, due to limited organisational resources and small teams, they had previously not been able to recruit or respond to issues of diversity in their team. As a result of the wide range of projects and activities delivered through GRCF Round 2, projects were able to advertise a wide range of roles that did not always require nature-based experience, e.g. roles that specialise in community or youth work. Project staff and participants interviewed in case studies welcomed this, as it enabled a more diverse cohort to try out new types of work and learn about the wide range of opportunities available within the environment sector.

Kickstart Trainees

Projects in workshops and in-depth case study interviews frequently praised the use of Kickstart within GRCF Round 2, as it enabled them to fill entry-level roles with more diverse candidates. Whilst all Kickstart trainees were recruited through Jobcentre Plus, this was understood to be having a wider reach than projects' typical recruitment pathways. Through Kickstart, many projects recruited individuals who had just left school with no experience or sector-specific qualifications. Projects saw value in recruiting applicants who were different from those that they would typically hire and in seeing the individuals grow. This was perceived to be having a positive impact on both the trainee and the organisation.

Whilst there was discussion surrounding the challenges of trainees leaving on completion of training, several projects did note that their trainees had progressed to full-time roles or apprentice roles within their organisation. This supports the legacy of the project and demonstrates the longevity of impact that the GRCF can have.

4.2.2 Challenges to Staff Recruitment

Challenges surrounding staff retention through GRCF Round 2 were identified as being a key lesson learnt for future funding. Many projects reported that, because GRCF Round 2 was only an 18-month project, they were only able to offer short-term contracts to staff, resulting in some staff securing other employment before project closure. Where staff have left their posts, projects have commonly been unable to fill these vacancies, either due to the unattractiveness of a short-term contract or because of a lack of capacity to repeat recruitment processes. In addition to this, whilst projects were able to recruit when they wished to do so, because of the 18-month delivery period, projects frequently looked to recruit at the same time. This resulted in much higher competition in securing applicants than normal and meant that some projects were left with few to no applications for their GRCF roles.

Whilst to an extent this is unavoidable with short-term funding, future funding should consider if and how recruitment strategies could better account for this increased competition. This could include support in increasing the profile of opportunities,

further consideration of the geographical balance of awards to ensure an even spread of opportunities, and/or partnerships with other organisations with experience that are engaging with more diverse applicants.

Organisations' inability to offer competitive salaries was identified as being an additional barrier when looking to recruit staff. Projects noted that eNGO roles are typically lower-paid than roles in the private sector and that they were unable to offer higher salaries for their GRCF Round 2 roles. This made it more difficult for projects to compete for appropriate candidates with desirable qualifications.

Concerns surrounding low pay alongside the risk of high staff turnover due to short-term contracts and the perception that roles in the environment sector are difficult to recruit for have created challenges to successful recruitment. This was especially noted in discussions with projects delivering against the connecting people with nature theme, where projects reported facing difficulty in recruiting individuals who were knowledgeable about nature who also had the ability to engage a wide range of audiences. To overcome this, projects typically recruited applicants with experience in engaging their target groups, rather than individuals with the desired environmental skills:

'Staff turnover is through the roof in conservation. We can't keep up with the cost of living, so people [are] moving to the private sector. It is becoming a pattern. Now we get more youth workers applying for more conservation specialists.' **(Workshop project response)**

Hiring individuals with increased people-centred skills may enable projects to reach a wider range of audiences. However, it also poses the risk that projects will not be able to secure the range of conservation and other environmental skills that they require.

In discussions surrounding applicants, there was an overall feeling that there is a lack of quality candidates within the sector, which could be owing to a lack of awareness of the broad spectrum of roles available in the sector, as well as the lower salary and short-term offers. It was noted, however, that there were still many high-quality candidates applying, albeit from a smaller pool of individuals than expected. Some projects were able to employ current volunteers in a paid role, which is beneficial because they have a working knowledge of the project and organisation. Likewise, many were able to advance existing employees into new roles. This provides evidence of upskilling opportunities being made available through engagement with the Fund.

Whilst projects did report largely being more resilient because of GRCF Round 2, a minority reflected that the short-term nature of funding limits their ability to sustain themselves and their staff. Short-term funds frequently require organisations to

create new roles to support the project. This, projects suggested, means that staff roles are not sustainable beyond that individual project:

‘The problem for us is that if we go for more grants they have to be new positions, so you’re having the issue of reinventing when you only want to keep that member of staff.’ **(Workshop project response)**

Whilst this was a common concern, it is important to highlight that many project roles could be adapted in order to ensure long-term sustainability. This suggests that some organisations need additional support in adapting project-specific roles so as to make them more widely applicable beyond the lifetime of the GRCF or other short-term funds.

Kickstart Trainees

Projects across all themes indicated that whilst recruiting through Jobcentre Plus could support capacity, it also slowed down the process of recruitment. Projects described some Jobcentre Plus work coaches as encouraging young people who did not have an interest in working in the environment sector to apply for the available GRCF roles. This resulted in some unsuitable applicants being interviewed and a minority of hired trainees showing a lack of interest in or commitment to their GRCF role. Where projects were unable to fill their Kickstart trainee role due to a lack of suitable applicants, they relied on volunteers to complete work allocated for trainees. Challenges in engaging appropriate trainees reiterate the need for future programmes to consider working with partners with experience in engaging a wider range of applicants:

‘Work needs to be done within the sector to promote what other opportunities there are. There are various green jobs out there (e.g. marketing, investment planning, project management, etc.). The Kickstart scheme should have been slightly longer to get more commitment. We needed a wider pool of people outside of Jobcentre Plus specifically.’ **(Workshop project response)**

This would extend the reach of opportunities available and further improve the diversity of the environment sector workforce overall.

Projects also commonly reported that it could be a challenge to offer trainees sufficient pastoral support. This was at times exacerbated by trainees’ additional support needs derived from complex home lives and/or a lack of financial support.

Travel to rural and/or remote project sites was also a key concern where trainees did not have driving licences, the funds to learn to drive, or easy access to public transport. As the Kickstart scheme aims to support young people who are at risk of long-term unemployment, it is unsurprising that additional pastoral support has been required for Kickstart trainees. Whilst some eNGOs offer this level of support, traineeships like Kickstart are a good opportunity to fill vacancies within the sector whilst also ensuring that it continues to diversify and reach new audiences. Funders

must promote these types of schemes to encourage the growth of the sector, as well as signposting from which eNGOs additional support can be sourced to ensure that pastoral support preparations are adequate.

Projects also reflected that the finite duration of GRCF Round 2 also meant that supporting Kickstart trainees could be challenging. Most projects that recruited Kickstart trainees stated that they were prepared at the outset for the additional pastoral support required in order to effectively recruit, train and retain Kickstart trainees. However, this commonly felt more difficult than anticipated because of the limited time that they had to deliver and achieve their GRCF Round 2 targets. In these cases, projects reported that instances in which individuals did not finish their traineeship or secured permanent employment part-way through were more stressful than they would be normally because the project did not have the capacity to recruit new trainees.

Whilst projects were largely positive about their ability to diversify their workforces through the GRCF, staff and trainees interviewed in in-depth case study interviews highlighted the risk of this appearing to be tokenistic. Although trainees were broadly positive about their experiences in their respective projects, they also identified challenges in initially entering organisations that were not diverse, and expressed concerns that they were perceived to be part of a 'trial'.

Whilst trainees and staff in these cases overcame these initial challenges, it is important to recognise that this is because detailed support plans and 'roadmaps for progression' were put in place prior to trainee recruitment. There is acknowledgement that organisational planning for support is key to enhancing the wider diversification of the workforce. When assessing future project bids, funders should consider whether trainee support plans are sufficient to support the diversification of the sector. Where plans are lacking, projects should seek specialist advice to aid trainee recruitment and support.

4.2.3 Recruiting Volunteers

Many projects recruited volunteers for their GRCF Round 2 projects, particularly those delivering against the connecting people with nature theme. This cohort within the workshops described benefitting from certain environmental issues being seen as current 'hot topics', e.g. pollution, as it meant that individuals were already keen to take action when they were engaged. Additionally, many projects already had committed and experienced volunteers who were able to engage with projects straight away. This was key for some projects because it enabled them to get their delivery up and running quickly. Where funded delivery is relatively short, eNGOs should reflect on their existing assets, e.g. volunteers, when considering timeframes for their delivery. Where projects cannot utilise existing volunteer support, recruitment strategies may be less feasible within a short period of time.

The use of one-off or semi-regular workshops regarding a specific activity or topic, e.g. cycling events with a focus on nature, events focusing on pollution specifically, or the offer of corporate days, was frequently described by projects as being an effective method with which to engage new volunteers. These types of workshops allowed potential volunteers to become involved in short-term activities (rather than making long-term commitments). As a result, projects reported gaining better engagement from these sessions than anticipated, which for some volunteers resulted in longer-term engagement once they were invested in the project. Whilst short-term activities may have a limited legacy after project delivery, it is important to consider that increasing the availability of 'micro-volunteering' options can result in more volunteers committing to longer-term activities once they have effectively engaged with organisations.

Many projects explained that GRCF Round 2 has been essential in developing their volunteer coordination. Projects in workshops and in-depth case study interviews reported that this funding allowed them to have dedicated coordinators with set resources and the capacity to focus on building relationships with harder-to-reach communities. The impact of this on many projects has been considerable, allowing organisations to review their wider strategies for engagement and make structural changes to permanent staff roles. Moreover, the funding has supported upskilling opportunities for volunteers, including nature-specific training (e.g. tree or species identification) and general training (e.g. mental health and first aid training).

Within this, it was noted that whilst volunteers are engaging with upskilling opportunities, finding volunteers willing to take up leadership roles, which would further contribute to their upskilling, has been more difficult. Projects explained that this is partly due to the inability to offer a salary, but also owing to a lack of confidence amongst newer volunteers:

'The funding is essential to manage this number of volunteers. We needed that community ranger role to train and manage them — this funded through GRCF.' **(Workshop project response)**

4.2.4 Challenges with Volunteer Recruitment

After the COVID-19 lockdown measures, organisations commonly noted a decrease in their regular volunteer numbers. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) noted that over one third of organisations had witnessed a decline in their regular volunteer numbers between March 2020 and May 2021 ([COVID-19 Voluntary Sector Impact Barometer](#), NCVO, May 2021). For projects engaging in thematic workshops that were experiencing this, reasons were commonly due to increased anxiety, inactivity, or an inability to engage.

Similarly to challenges faced in staff recruitment, projects in thematic workshops and in-depth case study interviews also voiced barriers to engaging with a diverse range of volunteers. Whilst projects frequently evidenced instances in which their activities

were intergenerational, they also highlighted that their core volunteer base is older, white, and middle-class, as this demographic typically has more free time available to volunteer. Furthermore, projects faced challenges in engaging young people in volunteer opportunities. As with Kickstart recruits, projects found it difficult to find existing staff with the required skills and resources available to actively seek out young people. To overcome this, some projects offered alternative activities to appeal to younger age groups, e.g. sport that included nature conservation activities. This again highlights a wider need for greater engagement expertise to encourage more diverse audiences to engage with nature.

Projects within the 'connecting people with nature'-themed workshops and in-depth case study interviews stressed the importance of labelling volunteer groups broadly to encourage participation and avoid individuals feeling like the groups were 'not for them'. For example, groups that specifically targeted individuals who were long-term unemployed had poor uptake until they were 'rebranded' in order to reach out to wider audiences. What is more, projects reported that engaging with existing community groups has helped to identify how best to engage with local communities and audiences whom they were struggling to reach.

One project highlighted in in-depth case study interviews that prior to GRCF Round 2, they had limited success in reaching local communities. Once they had the resources available to employ a volunteer coordinator through the GRCF, they were able to identify where previous efforts to engage local people had failed because they were duplicating efforts made by more established groups. As a result, this project has been able to work effectively with local groups and better identify local needs that they can support.

4.2.5 Organisational Resilience

Discussions through thematic workshops evidenced how the GRCF has positively impacted projects' long-term capacity and resilience. Projects explained how it provided new opportunities for both delivery and engagement and gave them the ability to embed these in their local community.

Specifically, some projects were able to deliver bigger projects with regard to broader topics than they had done previously, e.g. including ecological surveys or delivering educational sessions, which provide learning for the future. Engagement with the GRCF also encouraged increased ambitions with delivery, such as engaging new areas and communities, whilst showcasing the importance of such delivery to future potential funding streams:

'It was a new opportunity to take advantage of new situations that you didn't know of before you started the project. When additional funding and capital come along, we can build that into the project and increase outputs'
(Workshop response)

‘Money has made it possible to show what we do is important to trustees.’
(Workshop response)

Projects in thematic workshops noted that the delivery carried out as part of their GRCF Round 2 funding had contributed to resilience and capacity through the creation of assets, resources and opportunities. Many projects had created information packs, published reviews, and created community resources that can be used to encourage future delivery within the community as well as inform those involved in any way with the organisation.

Projects were also confident in their ability to sustain project activities because of the engagement and capacity-building activities carried out through GRCF Round 2. This resulted in practical day-to-day sustainment of project activities as well as wider conceptual sustainment due to changes in the way in which local communities connect with nature. Where projects described how they would continue delivering their activities in the longer term, they typically described being able to maintain activities with the support of partnerships developed through project delivery. These included partnerships with a wide range of local partners such as other eNGOs, schools, local authorities, volunteer groups, parishes, and other local assets.

Partnership working was also perceived to be enhancing the resilience of organisations when discussing the recruitment of participants and volunteers. In particular, projects described the value of engaging community groups, noting that they can engage their local community in bespoke ways that are appropriate to them, whilst also providing the physical spaces in which to do so. Where the GRCF supports the creation of longstanding relationships with other groups to support the volunteer base and diversify those involved, this may contribute to longer-term sustainability of projects:

‘I think a major success has been the engagement with community groups [because] they know what works for people, as they have the pre-existing knowledge and experience in doing nature-related activities with their local community.’ **(Workshop project response)**

‘We’ve learned that we have to build a relationship with communities to get them to come out and volunteer.’ **(Workshop project response)**

‘Having colleges and other community spaces made it a lot more accessible because it’s taking the site to them.’ **(Workshop project response)**

Projects and their partners were commonly able to maintain delivery due to the GRCF Round 2 project infrastructure in place through capacity building, skill and knowledge development, and improved enthusiasm and motivation of partners to support local nature and the environment. In some cases, projects were unable to determine whether specific activities would be continued; however, they highlighted

that project delivery has changed mindsets, which, they reported, would result in longer-term action for local nature and the environment. One project stated:

‘The [GRCF Round 2 grant] fitted into the general ethos we’re trying to build in the community, which is about changing the way greenspaces are viewed, and this has enabled us to carry this [project activity] on. There is a strong legacy from [GRCF Round 2]. Community engagement will carry on through this, as we now have [formed] good links with local schools who are looking to improve greenspaces [...] and we have good relationships with those schools.’
(Workshop project response)

Whilst a number of projects indicated that the GRCF had improved capacity regarding aspects of recruitment, many noted that this capacity does not always stretch to cementing relationships that take longer to establish, such as with landowners or harder-to-reach groups. This is intensified by the short timescale of GRCF Round 2 as well as the digital divide that projects feel is present, wherein opportunities are advertised online (which is not accessible to all communities). With this considered, a number indicated that the short timescale had forced new ways of working and helped to ensure efficient working methods within partnerships.

5. Project Reflections

Section Summary:

- ALB support at the application stage was described by projects as being helpful, albeit minimally in comparison to the support that projects received from ALBs during project delivery. Projects most commonly reported that changes to their application due to ALB support were marginal and did not materially change their project plans.
- The finite duration of GRCF Round 2 has reminded eNGOs that where project time is limited, they need to be realistic in their engagement goals.
- Most projects highlighted that GRCF Round 2 project delivery has reinforced how important it is to have space and time to recruit and train individuals for work relating to nature conservation and restoration and nature-based solutions.
- An 18-month delivery window was described as being challenging for projects, considering wider global supply chain pressures, COVID-19, and extreme weather that affected some projects' ability to physically deliver.
- Where projects were confident in their ability to sustain project activities beyond the lifetime of GRCF Round 2, this was commonly due to tangible outcomes that they have secured through their project's duration.
- Where projects were less confident in their ability to sustain GRCF Round 2 activities, this was largely due to a lack of funding with which to do so. In these cases, however, GRCF Round 2 has provided an effective 'evidence base' that will help them moving forward.

This section explores additional topics included within workshops that reach across all GRCF themes. This includes ALB support received by projects over £250,000 at the application phase, lessons learnt through project delivery, and sustainability (including next steps and project legacy).

5.1 ALB Support

Few projects were able to reflect on the ALB support received at the GRCF Round 2 application stage. This was primarily because projects have found it difficult to differentiate between the support that they received from ALBs prior to securing their grant as well as the support that they received during delivery. Support from ALBs has commonly been longer-term than just one meeting at the application stage. As a result, the initial meeting does not always appear to be pivotal in isolation. Additionally, project representatives in workshops were commonly unable to provide great detail on the initial ALB support because they were not involved in the development of the initial expression of interest (EOI).

Where relevant, ALB support at the application stage was described by projects as being helpful, albeit minimally in comparison to the support that projects received from ALBs during project delivery. Projects most commonly reported that changes to

their application due to ALB support were marginal and did not materially change their project plans. In these cases, projects suggested that ALB support may have been more useful if there were substantial changes needed within their application:

‘While it didn’t change our way that much because we were on that line, to begin with, I imagine it would have been very helpful if we were going down the wrong path.’ **(Workshop project response)**

This echoes findings from the Wave One survey outlined in previous reporting, wherein projects were positive about ALB support but only in a limited fashion.

As highlighted above, projects have worked with ALBs within their project delivery due to their expertise and remit over land, forests, and other natural spaces. Where this was the case, projects found support from ALBs to be much more valuable once project delivery had commenced, with support before this being of limited use because of the finite time available to develop a bid. Considering that ALBs will be able to provide a much broader and extensive range of support when working in partnership with projects, this is unsurprising.

Whilst projects were positive about ALB support, support at application stage was typically restricted and of limited value. Future provision should consider whether funds used to provide ALB support at the application stage could be better used to offer targeted support during project delivery, as well as whether advice regarding resilience and employment is more needed or utilised to facilitate network events in which projects and ALBs could engage, share experiences and challenges, and profit from greater peer network infrastructure.

5.2 Lessons Learnt

This subsection explores project reflections on the lessons that they have learnt as a result of GRCF Round 2 project delivery. These include reflections on engaging with the public and specific groups, training and skills, project delivery, and organisational needs.

5.2.1 Engagement

When looking to connect people with nature, projects frequently reported that they had learnt the value of offering a range of different opportunities to engage with communities (see [Section 4.2.3](#) for further details). Whilst most project organisations have experience of engaging volunteers and the general public, GRCF Round 2 projects commonly looked to engage new target groups and/or groups with traditionally less access to and engagement with nature, e.g. Black, Asian or Minoritised Ethnic Communities. This has resulted in projects trying and testing new strategies of engagement to see ‘what works’. In most cases, projects reiterated the importance of offering a range of flexible opportunities to ensure that people feel able to engage in delivery that feels comfortable and accessible for them. One project stated:

‘The key lesson we have learnt is [the importance of] offering a variety of connection opportunities. We have done long-term [engagement], and one-off events and short-term [engagement are] useful to connect with different people across all ages, offering over weekends, etc. Variation in structure [is a] key lesson learnt.’ **(Workshop project response)**

Engaging with young people was a new challenge for some projects. This included recruiting young people to youth panels advising the organisation and engaging with young people from the general public. In a minority of cases, projects in workshops and in-depth case study interviews reported it being initially difficult for their colleagues to see the value of bringing in young people to offer new perspectives due to the resources and capacity that this approach requires. Once young people were engaged, however, most projects were positively surprised by the benefits of getting young people involved.

A few projects reported setting up youth advisory panels and/or engaging young people who then supported the project organisations in developing job roles and applications suited to young people. This offered organisations a new perspective and diversified thought within project teams. Future funding should continue to champion this aspect of connecting people with nature by encouraging organisations to diversify, ultimately benefitting the environment sector.

Approximately half of the projects involved in workshops reported that the finite duration of GRCF Round 2 had also taught them that where project time is limited, they need to be realistic in their engagement goals. Whilst many projects have successfully engaged local communities and groups, engaging those who are not already connected with nature in some capacity can be difficult and a slow process. Projects recognised that in some cases they have only been able to engage individuals already with a connection with nature or ‘lay the foundations’ for engagement with groups with no or limited connections with nature. This is key learning because projects going for short-term funding should acknowledge that community engagement, particularly engagement with groups with a limited connection with nature, is an iterative process.

5.2.2 Training and Employment

Most projects in workshops highlighted that GRCF Round 2 project delivery has reinforced how important it is to have space and time to recruit and train individuals for work relating to nature conservation and restoration and nature-based solutions. Projects acknowledged that training for these types of activity takes time and can be difficult but is crucial in ensuring that project delivery has tangible and effective impacts on nature and the environment:

‘Personally, I wanted to move into conservation and I’ve had that chance now and I have seen that the results take a long time, specifically habit work and restoration. Feedback from colleagues has been that it’s about understanding

and managing expectations, as this takes years (not months).’ **(Workshop project response)**

A loss of staff is a common challenge for short-term project funds and raises concerns surrounding the retention of skills within the sector. In this instance, projects reflected that with future funding, they would look to strategically map out succession plans for key staff after grant funding earlier in project delivery to ensure that skills and knowledge can sustainably build and strengthen their respective organisations.

5.2.3 Delivery and Organisational Needs

As acknowledged in the subsections above, when reflecting on the lessons that they have learnt from GRCF Round 2 project delivery, projects frequently referenced the limited time available to deliver. Most commonly, projects suggested that their experience of GRCF Round 2 has taught them the importance of strategic capacity planning, risk management, and managing expectations. Some challenges regarding capacity and delivery within GRCF Round 2 were unforeseen and unavoidable. This, projects suggested, meant that they needed to have better contingency plans and oversight to ensure that they were able to adapt and overcome barriers.

It is important to highlight that projects were overwhelmingly positive about the flexibility afforded to them by the Heritage Fund in GRCF Round 2, as it enabled them to respond to real-time difficulties and adapt as needed. Furthermore, a minority of staff reflected that for future funding of this nature, they would be sure to integrate an administrative role into project plans to reduce paperwork pressures on delivery staff.

Whilst projects commonly flagged challenges that they faced in delivering a short-term project, they were also overwhelmingly positive about the GRCF and the opportunities that it provided:

‘The lesson learned for our organisation is to always give projects and funding like this a shot. If there is funding that can help, then give it a go. This has been a lifeline in our organisation to retain staff and rebuild a team that was affected by COVID-19. Apart from the lack of time, which was difficult, it was well worth it.’ **(Workshop project response)**

A few projects also reported in workshops and in-depth case study interviews that whilst they do not want to work under the level of pressure required to deliver in 18 months, taking part has shown them that they can do it. Overall, projects reflected that GRCF Round 2 has been a positive experience but also a reminder that even where projects appear to be ‘shovel-ready’, they typically need more:

‘[The learning has been about] understanding and managing expectations, as this takes years, not months. [...] There is no such thing as a shovel-ready

project. This fund was designed for that, but they don't exist. We wanted to hit the ground running, but it all takes time and development.' (**Workshop project response**)

5.3 Sustainability

This subsection explores project views on the sustainability of project activities and considerations being made for future plans. These include tangible changes that will provide a legacy from GRCF Round 2, increased engagement with communities and partners, and future plans contingent on additional funding.

Where projects were confident in their ability to sustain project activities beyond the lifetime of GRCF Round 2, this was commonly due to tangible outcomes that they have secured through their project's duration. Tangible outcomes include capital works such as heat pump and solar panel installation as well as process-oriented outputs, e.g. land management plans and access agreements. Where capital works were installed, projects were positive about their ability to be less reliant on short-term funding, as these were typically substantial longer-term solutions.

Whilst capital works such as the installation of energy generators require maintenance, projects were generally confident that they had the required skillsets and knowledge, both internally within their organisations and through volunteers. Similarly, land management agreements and access agreements obtained through project delivery were seen to be contributing to longer-term solutions, as they ensure maintenance and cohesion between local partners, in some cases for up to 10 years.

The GRCF-supported recruitment of both new staff and volunteers has subsequently increased the capacity to deliver community aspects of projects, whilst also providing upskilling opportunities and more stability. It has, for some, also encouraged cross-department working and collective working amongst both paid and voluntary staff. To that end, some projects felt that they now engage in better project planning, which involves looking at the next steps for their organisation. To inform this, projects noted that the GRCF had provided the opportunity to engage in data collection that is relevant to their project, as well as increasing knowledge regarding conservation, such as ecological surveys or understanding community needs, to gain an understanding of their organisation's baseline position, which can improve resilience through greater knowledge and understanding.

This, in turn, is thought to improve the confidence of communities, for example, to deliver a citizen science role, whilst also contributing to projects' ability to embed themselves within the community. More practically, as noted in other sections of this report, the capital works of creating more space and equipment provide greater opportunity for effective delivery and provide greater capacity. Some projects felt that this investment in the community has in part already benefitted the local economy and will positively benefit the local economy moving forward through the provision of employment opportunities and the provision of resources.

Projects explained that whilst there has been a substantial impact delivered, funding availability after GRCF Round 2 would inevitably affect their ability to continue delivering in the same way, as many noted that there is minimal core funding available to cover broader elements of delivery and training. Linked to this, there was a feeling that funding would not be available to sustain the current delivery that has already been established, subsequently making it more difficult to create substantial impact and change. To that end, there is a reliance, projects felt, on individuals to continue the legacy through shared learning and the deployment of new skills, for example:

‘I think the majority of changes made because of the project will remain, but we are going to [be] dependent on individuals. I am hoping we’ve done enough training with them to have the confidence to be able to maintain those spaces and continue to improve them.’ **(Workshop response)**

‘We can draw things out of this project even if [the] project itself isn’t sustained. People have been trained to do things that will continue after the project to an extent. There will be a lot of small-scale local legacies.’ **(Workshop response)**

Projects in workshops and in-depth case study interviews emphasised that they are more likely to be able to sustain project activities and measure their impact due to the upskilling of volunteers and staff with regard to undertaking ecological surveys. As previously highlighted, this is a crucial aspect of nature and environment project delivery; however, there is frequently a limited option to include this within funded or core delivery. GRCF Round 2 has allowed organisations to embed knowledge and skills but also, in some cases, sustainably measure their progress and tangible outcomes.

Where projects were less confident in their ability to sustain GRCF Round 2 activities, most were looking to secure additional funding and a minority were looking at other sources of revenue to reduce their reliance on grants.

In these cases, projects suggested that their participation in GRCF Round 2 has been beneficial, as it has provided an effective ‘evidence base’ that will help them to secure additional funding. Projects described this as proving their ability to deliver this type of work. One project stated:

‘We could not absorb [the cost of delivery] internally, so we are looking for funding to continue the work we've started. [...] We now have a track record, so we can demonstrate success to funders, and tangible things we can point to. The fact that we’ve delivered a successful project in the past is beneficial to have.’ **(Workshop project response)**

Where projects were unable to sustain GRCF Round 2 activities, however, this was largely due to a lack of funding with which to do so. This is unsurprising, given wider global supply chain pressures, extreme seasonality, inflation, and pressures associated with the cost-of-living crisis within the environment sector. Without additional funding, many organisations are only able to cover core costs. What is more, a minority of projects identified that funders typically have a range of different requirements and want new and innovative projects, rather than the continuation of previous project delivery, making it difficult to sustain current activity. Additionally, projects highlighted that short-term funding has resulted in staffing challenges both internally and within the sector as a whole, wherein staff leave for permanent roles elsewhere, leaving posts unfilled.

Overall, whilst many projects are confident in their ability to sustain GRCF Round 2 activities post-grant, there are also considerable challenges faced due to the nature of funding opportunities within the sector. Funders offering future opportunities should reflect on concerns that projects are typically not as 'shovel-ready' as they may first appear to be and that there is a wide need for funding in order to continue projects achieving or set to achieve tangible outcomes.

6. Early Conclusions and Next Steps

Through GRCF Round 2, 922 sites have benefitted environmentally, 224,620 trees have been planted, 104,750 people have been engaged, and 706 job opportunities have been supported to date. This, alongside many other key positive impacts, shows the positive progress made so far in GRCF Round 2.

As in previous reporting, this section of the report outlines key emerging findings from GRCF Round 2 and the learning and recommendations so far. Please note that recommendations made are intended to be considered for future delivery within the GRCF and for future funding opportunities that incentivise the restoration and creation of habitats.

6.1 Nature Conservation and Restoration and Nature-Based Solutions

Monitoring system data show a range of activities undertaken and outputs collected through GRCF Round 2, showing positive project impacts against the nature conservation and restoration and nature-based solution themes. GRCF projects have directly benefitted 98,969 ha and 129 km of land across 922 sites across England. Within this, one per cent of the hectares of land involved environmental creation, 56 per cent involved environmental restoration or management, and two per cent involved both creation and restoration, with 41 percent not specified.

The ability to measure baseline ecological data is a key success of GRCF Round 2 delivery to date, as it has enabled projects to tangibly measure the impact of their work. Projects suggested that this will be beneficial in the longer term because they will be better able to ensure that conservation and restoration work is led by evidence. However, although most projects in workshops could outline the longer-term impacts that they can foresee occurring because of their project delivery, few were able to identify outcomes for nature and the environment that are fully realised in the shorter term. Projects in workshops could outline the wider impacts of their project delivery. This is unsurprising, given that conservation and restoration activities and nature-based solutions take time to develop and yield measurable results. To identify whether tangible outcomes have occurred, many projects need to undertake further longitudinal surveys post-project. Whilst a minority of projects have sufficient funding to undertake longitudinal surveys, most are reliant on volunteers or securing additional funding to be able to ascertain their long-term contributions to greater biodiversity, conservation and restoration.

Recommendation One: Future provision should look to offer additional support and guidance around the long-term monitoring of project impact. This will allow projects to prioritise specific impact measures and consider how they can sustainably monitor them post-funding.

Securing landowner consent was the most common challenge identified by projects delivering against the nature conservation and restoration and/or nature-based solution theme. This process took longer than anticipated and required additional time and resources to manage negotiations with landowners. Furthermore, projects identified similar challenges in obtaining consent from local authorities and the Environment Agency. To overcome this, projects suggested that in the future they would ensure clear and immediate communication with the respective organisation or landowner at the point of grants being approved.

Recommendation Two: In future provision, projects should ensure that there is clear and ongoing communication with ALBs, other relevant organisations, and landowners with regard to plans and pipelines of activity to remind them of the commitments made at the application stage.

Projects offered staff, trainees and participants a wide range of specific training that would allow them to take part in and sustain nature conservation and restoration activities. Specific training and general training have allowed projects to upskill existing staff, let them explore new areas of interest, ensure that trainees can effectively develop skills that will be transferrable to other environmental roles post-project, and let volunteers develop knowledge and a bespoke set of skills regarding particular nature conservation and restoration and/or nature-based solutions. A minority of projects also reflected that whilst they had offered traineeships or internships previously, this was the first time that skills specific to nature conservation and restoration had been at the forefront of their training plans. This has been a key benefit of GRCF Round 2, as it has ensured that individuals entering the sector are learning valuable and sector-specific skills.

6.2 Connecting People with Nature

In total, 104,750 people have engaged with 6,329 events through GRCF Round 2 to date. Almost half of all events were described as targeting a specific group (45 per cent; 2850/6329). These events were typically targeted at particular groups who might be less likely to engage with nature, including people from deprived backgrounds, people NEET, people from Black, Asian or Minoritised Ethnic Communities, asylum seekers, people with disabilities or poor mental health, and women. Additionally, 203 types of infrastructure have been installed or improved, with 36 projects detailing works carried out over 174 sites.

In workshops and case studies, projects frequently stated that connecting people with nature provided a domino effect, wherein nature connectedness encouraged individuals to become involved in conservation and restoration activities. Moreover, many projects have successfully employed citizen science methods in their GRCF Round 2 project delivery, which has supported the management of nature moving forward and resulted in individuals understanding the importance of long-term engagement (rather than ad hoc activity participation).

Projects commonly reported using a proportion of their GRCF grant to acquire transport. This was particularly useful when targeting groups with limited access to nature, as groups and schools often did not have the resources to access projects, particularly in rural areas. Overall, projects reported that the provision of grant funding to directly support connections with nature has helped them to be more inclusive in their offer. However, a minority of projects were unsure as to whether they were effectively engaging with a diverse range of groups. Although the GRCF has presented opportunities to widen their reach and increase diversity, projects noted that it takes time to engage and build trust with gatekeeper organisations representing diverse groups. Although the timeframe of the GRCF funding is limited, projects have used a range of different approaches to help overcome this challenge. Similar challenges were reported regarding project recruitment and are explored below.

6.3 Resilience and Employment

Overall, projects were able to successfully recruit for their GRCF Round 2 roles. In total, 706 job opportunities have been safeguarded or created within 89 out of the 90 GRCF Round 2 projects. These are equivalent to 484.2 FTE jobs. Amongst these 706 roles, 482 have been created for the GRCF (68 per cent), 128 are existing roles protected from redundancy (18 per cent), and 92 roles involve partial support with full cost recovery (13 per cent).

The majority of projects involved in thematic workshops felt that GRCF Round 2 had helped to create new roles within their organisations and secure existing roles, including saving some roles from redundancy as well as contributing to more sustainable employment. GRCF grants have also provided space and resources for projects to reflect on how to recruit inclusively and sustainably. Projects reported that prior to the GRCF they had limited organisational resources and small teams and, therefore, had been unable to respond to issues of diversity in their team.

However, whilst projects were largely positive about their ability to diversify their workforces through the GRCF, staff and trainees interviewed in in-depth case study interviews highlighted the risk of this appearing to be tokenistic. Although trainees were broadly positive about their experiences of their respective projects, they also identified challenges in initially entering organisations that were not diverse, as well as expressing concerns that they were perceived to be part of a 'trial'. In all cases, trainees and staff reported that these concerns were overcome by effective support plans and clear 'roadmaps for progression' that were designed prior to recruitment.

A loss of staff is a common challenge for short-term project funds and raises concerns surrounding the retention of skills within the sector. Projects reflected that with future funding, they would look to strategically map out succession plans for key staff after grant funding earlier in project delivery to ensure that skills and knowledge can sustainably build and strengthen their respective organisations.

Recommendation Three: When assessing future project bids, funders should consider whether trainee support plans are sufficient to support individuals and the diversification of the sector. Where plans are lacking, projects should seek specialist advice to aid trainee recruitment and support.

In addition, the 18-month delivery period of GRCF Round 2 meant that projects frequently looked to recruit at the same time. This resulted in much higher competition in securing applicants than normal and meant that some projects were left with few to no applications for their GRCF roles.

Recommendation Four: Future funding should consider if and how recruitment strategies could better account for this increased competition during short-term funds. This could include support in increasing the profile of opportunities and/or partnerships with other organisations with experience engaging with a diverse range of applicants.

Many projects had committed and experienced volunteers already involved with their respective organisations who were able to engage with projects straight away. This was key for some projects because it enabled them to get their delivery up and running quickly. Where funded delivery is relatively short, eNGOs should reflect on their existing assets when considering timeframes for their delivery. Where projects cannot utilise existing volunteer support, recruitment strategies may be less feasible within a short period of time.

6.4 Project Reflections

As found in previous reporting, where relevant, ALB support was described by projects as being helpful, albeit minimally. Projects most commonly reported that changes to their application due to ALB support were marginal and did not materially change their project plans. Projects found support from ALBs to be much more valuable once project delivery had commenced, with support before this being of limited use because of the finite time available to develop a bid.

Recommendation Five: Future provision should consider whether funds used to provide ALB support at the application stage could be better used to offer finite support during project delivery. This could include offering ALB advice around organisational resilience and employment or using funds to facilitate network events in which projects and ALBs could engage, share experiences and challenges, and profit from greater peer network infrastructure.

Projects involved in workshops and case study interviews frequently reported that the finite duration of GRCF Round 2 has taught them that where project time is

limited, they need to be realistic in their goals. Projects suggested that their experience of GRCF Round 2 has taught them the importance of strategic capacity planning and managing expectations. Some challenges regarding capacity and delivery within GRCF Round 2 were unforeseen and unavoidable. This, projects suggested, meant that they needed to have better contingency plans and oversight to ensure that they were able to adapt and overcome barriers. It is important to highlight that projects were overwhelmingly positive about the flexibility afforded to them by the Heritage Fund, as it enabled them to respond to real-time difficulties and adapt as needed.

Where projects were confident in their ability to sustain project activities beyond the lifetime of GRCF Round 2, this was commonly due to tangible outcomes that they have secured through their project's duration, e.g. land management plans and access agreements. Projects in workshops and in-depth case study interviews also emphasised that they are more likely to be able to sustain project activities and measure their impact due to the upskilling of volunteers and staff with regard to undertaking ecological surveys.

Where projects were less confident in their ability to sustain GRCF Round 2 activities, this was largely due to a lack of funding with which to do so. As a result, most projects are looking to secure additional funding and a minority are looking at other sources of revenue to reduce their reliance on grants. In these cases, however, projects suggested that their participation in GRCF Round 2 has been beneficial, as it has provided an effective 'evidence base' that will help them moving forward.

Contact us



0330 122 8658



wavehill@wavehill.com



wavehill.com

Follow us on our social media



[@wavehilltweets](https://twitter.com/wavehilltweets)



[wavehill](https://www.linkedin.com/company/wavehill)