



Evaluation of the Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF)

Interim Evaluation - Final

08 December 2021

A report submitted by [ICF Consulting Services](#)
in association with [Footprint Ecology](#)

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Evaluation of the Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF): Interim Evaluation – Draft Report

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Executive summary

Introduction

The Green Recovery Challenge Fund

The Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF) is a short-term competitive fund aimed at supporting environmental non-governmental organisations and their partners (eNGOs) to kick-start environmental renewal whilst creating and retaining jobs and enhancing their resilience. Round 1 of the GRCF was launched at pace in September 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It provided funding to support the delivery of environmental projects in England until Spring 2022. Funded projects were required to deliver against one or more of the following three environmental themes in line with the 25 Year Environment Plan (25 YEP):

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

The GRCF is intended also to address economic challenges affecting the eNGO sector and conservation activity as a result of COVID-19. Hence it also aims to:

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

The GRCF is funded by Defra and delivered by The National Lottery Heritage Fund (The Heritage Fund) in partnership with Natural England, the Forestry Commission, and the Environment Agency.

Total grants of £37.8 million were awarded to 69 projects in GRCF Round 1. Forty-seven projects were awarded 'medium sized' grants of between £50,000 and £250,000 and 22 were awarded 'large grants' of between £250,000 and £5,000,000. Large projects received £28.6 million in funding from the GRCF (76% of the total), while medium projects received £9.2 million (24%).

Evaluation of the GRCF

ICF was commissioned to deliver an evaluation of the GRCF Round 1 programme to include:

- Process evaluation to examine the process and context of delivery of the GRCF, what can be learned, and how delivery (of the GRCF and future similar funds) could be improved.
- Impact evaluation to examine the effects of the intervention and what difference it has made.
- Value for money evaluation to examine whether the benefits delivered by the GRCF justify the resources used.

This is the interim evaluation report, conducted halfway through the GRCF programme period. It provides evidence and lessons on how the GRCF has been delivered and on

project progress to date. A final evaluation will be conducted after the GRCF programme period ends (at the end of March 2022).

This evaluation report draws on the following evidence sources, including primary research conducted in August and early September 2021:

- An online survey of successful applicants. A total of 49 responses were received: a 71% response rate (69 projects were funded in total).
- An online survey of unsuccessful applicants. The survey was sent to 234 unsuccessful applicants (only those who did not reapply for GRCF Round 2 funding), with 77 responses received: a 33% response rate.
- Semi-structured interviews with 10 projects that received GRCF Round 1 funding.
- Semi-structured interviews with 11 GRCF stakeholders – including Defra, The Heritage Fund, Environment Agency, Forestry Commission and Natural England.
- Monitoring data from GRCF projects for a set of common indicators.
- Existing research and data including GRCF programme documents and websites and outputs from a series of lessons learnt sessions conducted by Defra and The Heritage Fund soon after the conclusion of the GRCF project start-up phase.

Was the GRCF delivered as intended?

The appropriateness of the GRCF to the wider context

Project applicants and GRCF stakeholders generally agreed that the GRCF was appropriate for the needs of the eNGO sector and the environment, seeking to balance the immediate financial needs of the sector resulting from COVID-19 with continuing funding for action against longer term environmental objectives. However there is a tension between these twin goals, primarily due to the timeframes over which action for both is needed.

The GRCF was the primary funding source accessible to eNGOs at the time. This, and the significant level of overapplication to the GRCF, indicate the GRCF could usefully have been a larger fund.

The speed with which the GRCF was designed and launched was generally commended by both applicants and GRCF stakeholders. Despite this, some considered the GRCF was still launched too late after the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the short time period available to put project applications together – necessary to deliver money to eNGOs quickly – put significant pressure on some eNGOs and potentially disadvantaged smaller eNGOs.

The application and start-up process

Overall the application process was found to work well. Promotion of the GRCF reached a wide audience (as evidenced by the level of oversubscription). For successful applicants the value of grants received was considered worth the resources committed to the application. The time to prepare applications was short due to the speed with which the GRCF needed to be delivered and many applicants found the reduced timescale challenging.

The information provided to applicants by The Heritage Fund during the application phase was useful, timely, accessible and readily available. However some applicants struggled with comprehension of the guidance. Pre-application advice and training – offered to all – was well received and coherent across the GRCF stakeholder organisations. One-to-one advice and clarification advice was not offered; however some applicants able to contact

The Heritage Fund found this support helpful. This potentially **disadvantaged other applicants who were not able receive similar advice.**

A high number of eNGOs expended resources on applications that were unsuccessful. This was particularly challenging as many organisations were experiencing financial shortfalls caused by the pandemic at this time. Greater market testing on potential demand was not undertaken due to the speed with which the GRCF was designed and launched. Future GRCF rounds should explore routes to ensure that demand better matches the available funding – either through managing demand or the amount of funding available.

GRCF project monitoring and evaluation

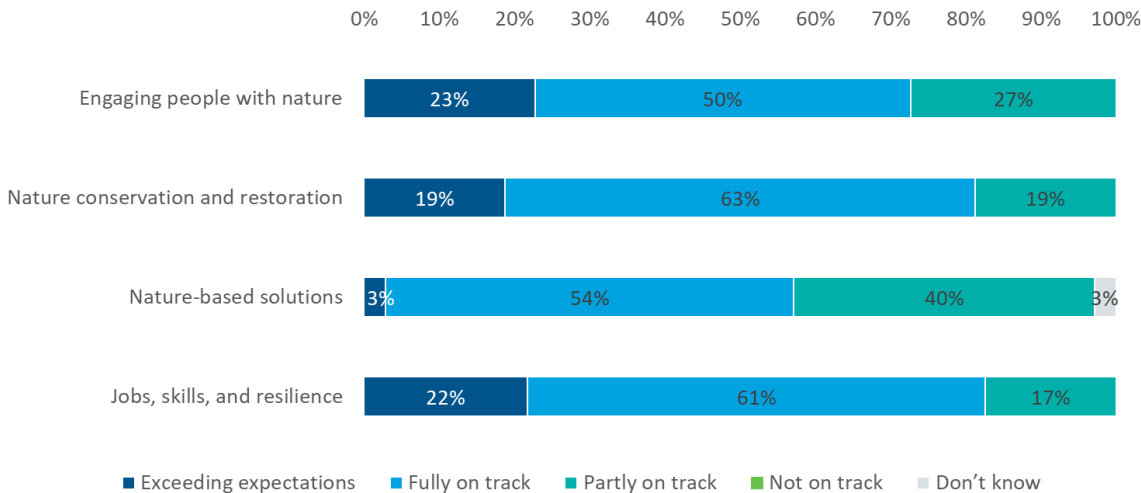
Projects consider themselves equipped to deliver GRCF progress reports and evaluation obligations. Additional output and outcome monitoring requirements were made at the beginning of the GRCF period. **Providing the guidance for this additional monitoring data earlier would have been beneficial** (for project planning and potentially for the quality of data). The monitoring data supports tracking of project performance.

Is the GRCF on track to achieve its intended outcomes?

The extent to which projects felt they are on track to reach their intended outcomes varied across the GRCF objectives. Respondents were most positive about the conservation and restoration and jobs, skills and resilience objectives. Respondents were least positive on the nature-based solutions objective, with only 57% indicating they were exceeding expectations or fully on track.

The majority of projects have faced barriers and challenges in delivering their project activities, but only 8% of respondents indicated that these were major. By far the most commonly identified reason for projects not being on track to achieve their target outcomes was COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns.

Figure ES1.1 To what extent do you think your project is on track to achieve its intended outcomes: (N=49)



Source: ICF survey of successful projects

Table ES1.2 To what extent do you think your project is on track to achieve its intended outcomes: (N=49)

Response categories	Engaging people with nature outcomes	Nature conservation and restoration outcomes	Nature-based solutions outcomes	Jobs, skills, and resilience outcomes
Exceeding expectations	23%	19%	3%	22%
Fully on track	50%	63%	54%	61%
Partly on track	27%	19%	40%	17%
Not on track	0%	0%	0%	0%
Don't know	0%	0%	3%	0%

Source: ICF survey of successful projects

Nature conservation and restoration and nature-based solutions

Environmental actions have taken place on 121 sites around England, benefiting upwards of 0.3 million hectares. Over half of the sites are providing actions on land with conservation designations, in particularly Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The most common UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) habitats targeted by actions are lowland mixed deciduous woodland, rivers and hedgerows.

Tree planting has so far taken place on 56 sites around England, planting nearly 106,000 trees. Whilst this represents only 13% of the total number expected based on project applications, many projects have faced delays as they were not able to get their project activities up and running fast enough at the beginning of the GRCF programme to meet the seasonal window for tree planting. It is therefore likely that the number of trees planted will increase greatly by the end of the programme period.

The most **common challenges** faced by projects to date include: securing land agreements and consents (particularly for multi-site projects), seasonal windows for activities being missed, relationship challenges with key stakeholders, availability of staff (due to COVID-19), as well as a general shortage of contractors and materials.

Engaging people in nature

Nearly 23,000 people are estimated to have been engaged through in-person activities by GRCF projects in the period to mid-July 2021, such as workshops and talks (including online), followed by educational sessions, active sessions (e.g. guided walks), and participating in survey work. Nearly half of the activities delivered have targeted underrepresented or other priority groups. **A further 3 million people have been engaged through mass online events.**

Engagement activity may reach more people during the second half of the GRCF period. Projects have had challenges in delivering their engagement activities, primarily due to social distancing restrictions resulting from COVID-19. These have resulted in many events initially being smaller than planned. Activities were also delayed with the majority of the activities now planned for the second half of the GRCF programme period. To mitigate the impacts of social distancing restrictions, some projects successfully shifted activities online, which helped to reach greater numbers of people than originally anticipated.

Employment and eNGO resilience

GRCF funding has so far, as of July 2021, directly supported a total of (at least) 459 positions, equivalent to 353 Full Time Equivalents (FTEs), and inclusive of 32

apprenticeships. Over three quarters of projects consider themselves to be exceeding expectations or fully on track to meet jobs and resilience goals and most have been able to recruit staff with the right skills.

The picture on employment benefits compared to expectations is not yet clear. For large projects, where employment projections were available, the number of roles created in lead and partner organisations is close to matching projected levels (125 FTEs reported vs 138 projected). Across other types of employment for large projects, including apprenticeships, reported levels are well below projections.

Some projects experienced delays in getting recruitment processes started and some faced challenges with application rates. Hence the **total level of employment supported by GRCF funding may increase over the remainder of the programme period.** Recruiting suitable senior and specialist staff as well as previously unemployed staff were flagged by some projects as particularly difficult.

What impact has the GRCF had?

The evidence suggests that a large proportion of the outcomes expected to be achieved through GRCF funding would not be secured without it.

The majority of successful applicants expressed the view that their project would not have gone ahead in the absence of GRCF funding. The majority of respondents suggested that there would be negative impacts on their organisation and staffing without GRCF funding.

Unsuccessful applicants are unlikely to take their projects forward with other funding - 45% of respondents indicated that their project was indefinitely delayed and 8% that they did not intend to progress it. In general, unsuccessful applicants who are managing to progress their project in the absence of GRCF funding indicate that their progress tends to be slower and their outcomes reduced.

Funded projects are actively planning to ensure their long-term legacy is delivered (i.e. that the longer term environmental, social and economic benefits of their activities materialise), with a range of mechanisms being deployed. These include securing additional funding, developing volunteer networks and empowering community groups, to enable the continuation of project activities and site management plans. The most common risk to the long-term legacy of projects risk identified by survey respondents was that of failing to secure additional funding. In particular the short-term employment benefits supported by GRCF – helping to retain and create jobs and skills development – are at risk of being lost if funding to retain these posts is not secured.

Was the GRCF value for money?

At this stage the value for money evaluation only includes an assessment of the impact of GRCF processes. It will only be possible to assess the full value for money of the GRCF when its full impacts can be measured and compared to the resources invested.

Overall, **the application and award process, programme management, monitoring and evaluation have contributed positively to value for money** for the funds invested. A high volume of applications was received, enabling the best quality projects to be selected. Projects secured match funding totalling £6.6million, equivalent to 17% of the total of GRCF grants, even though match funding was not a requirement under GRCF.

In terms of resource committed by the wider sector, the level of over-subscription meant that substantial amounts were committed by unsuccessful applicants in applying to The Heritage Fund. However, the opportunity costs of applying to GRCF were

limited – 6% of successful applicants and 27% of unsuccessful applicants surveyed said that they forwent other opportunities to apply to GRCF.

Lessons

Many of the challenges encountered in introducing the GRCF were an inevitable consequence of the unique context in which GRCF was introduced and related to the very tight timescale in which it was designed and implemented. This unique context may limit the extent to which general lessons can be learned which would be relevant to future programme delivery.

Lesson to improve programme delivery

- Formalising the relationship and shared understanding built between Defra group and The Heritage Fund, through ongoing dialogue and updating the formal agreement to an Memorandum of Understanding.
- Prioritising a streamlined market research action plan appropriate for rapid fund design processes to better understand and manage demand.
- Ensuring communication systems (including SharePoint and Teams) are fit for purpose in facilitating multi-partner team working on similar initiatives in future.
- Ensuring that online application portals are fit for purpose and capable of handling heavy demand from applicants, particularly around the period close to the application deadline.
- Ensuring that the support available to applications is the same for all in order to avoid unfair advantage for those able to contact staff at The Heritage Fund directly.
- Considering the development of common indicator sets earlier in the process to improve tracking of progress against targets.
- Improving project monitoring guidance for specific indicators, including jobs and spatial data, to improve the quality of data provided and reduce the extent of data gaps.
- Providing more detailed feedback to unsuccessful and successful applicants to promote learning and encourage the development of higher quality applications over time.

Lessons to improve delivery of targeted project outcomes

- Increasing the scale of funding to better match the scale of demand.
- Offering a parallel emergency funding stream to provide core funding to support those less able to put forward shovel-ready projects or those with less capacity to develop a bid at pace.
- Addressing the needs of seasonally dependent project activities through the timing of the overall programme.
- Ensuring that projects, particularly those with a high number of sites, fully understand the need to secure landowner consents within an appropriate timeframe.
- Ensuring that projects are aware and able to make use of the opportunities for flexibility in how awarded funding is spent across a project's planned activities.

Lessons to improve value for money

- Including an EoI or another light touch project shortlisting process for medium-sized projects, to limit the overall volume of full-scale applications and resources devoted to them, especially in situations where heavy demand is anticipated.
- Looking at whether alternative eligibility and project selection criteria might discourage lower quality applications, without lowering the volume of higher quality applications. This would require careful consideration, including of how to clearly communicate decision-making priorities.
- Reviewing match funding requirements, and their effects on demand, scheme objectives and overall value for money.
- Examining opportunities to extend the delivery timetable for nature investment projects, even for emergency response funds, to ensure impact and value for money.
- Considering opportunities for follow-on or legacy funding to ensure the longer-term potential of projects is achieved.

1 Introduction

The Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF) is a short-term competitive fund aimed at supporting environmental non-governmental organisations and their partners (eNGOs). Round 1 of the GRCF was launched at pace in September 2020. ICF was commissioned to deliver an evaluation of the GRCF Round 1 programme. This is the interim evaluation report, conducted halfway through the GRCF programme period. A final evaluation will be conducted after the GRCF programme period ends (at the end of March 2022).

1.1 The Green Recovery Challenge Fund

Round 1 of the GRCF was launched at pace in September 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It provided £40 million of funding, to support the delivery of environmental projects in England by March 2022. Funded projects were required to deliver against one or more of the following three environmental themes in line with the 25 YEP:

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

The GRCF is intended also to address economic issues affecting the eNGO sector and conservation activity as a result of COVID-19. Hence it also aims to:

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

Projects focusing on the three environmental themes should provide improvements to the physical state of the natural environment to enrich plants and wildlife, support climate change mitigation and adaptation and deliver ecosystem services. Many projects cover more than one theme and therefore deliver on more than one of the GRCF's objectives.

Steps were taken during the selection process to ensure that projects from across all regions of England were awarded grants and, in this regard, the GRCF will contribute to Natural England's endeavour to build strong partnerships across the country, in towns and cities and in rural areas. The GRCF is part of a wider package to boost the economy and support England's green recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The GRCF is funded by Defra and delivered by The Heritage Fund in partnership with Natural England, the Forestry Commission, and the Environment Agency. HM Treasury maintains control over public spending and provided the finance for the GRCF to Defra and hence subsequently into the GRCF. Defra developed the £40 million fund in collaboration with its Arm's-Length Bodies including the Environment Agency, Natural England and the Forestry Commission. The Heritage Fund is the main administrative body and decides which applications are successful and is responsible for distributing the grants, day-to-day governance and programme monitoring and evaluation.

1.2 Evaluation purpose and approach

The programme evaluation will be an independent evaluation of the GRCF, conducted over a period of nearly two years (Dec 2020 – Sept 2022). The scope of this evaluation study is limited to the original £40 million fund – GRCF Round 1. A second £40 million tranche of funding to be provided by the GRCF during 2021 – GRCF Round 2 – will be subject to a separate evaluation.

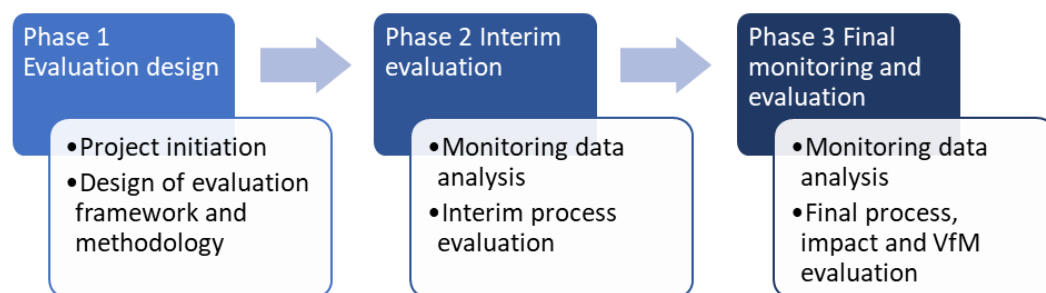
The evaluation consists of three main components, namely:

- Process evaluation to examine the process and context of delivery of the GRCF, what can be learned, and how delivery (of the GRCF and future similar funds) could be improved.
- Impact evaluation to examine the effects of the intervention and what difference it has made.
- Value for money evaluation to examine whether the benefits delivered by the GRCF justify the resources used.

The evaluation will be delivered in three phases (Figure 1.1):

- Phase 1: Evaluation design (December 2020 – May 2021). This initial phase of elaborated the evaluation questions and how they will be addressed. It developed a theory of change and outcomes framework for the GRCF that identified common themes and indicators (as far as possible) to facilitate the aggregation of outputs and outcomes at programme level. The evaluation design is available as a separate document¹.
- Phase 2: Interim monitoring and process evaluation (June 2021 - October 2021). Phase 2 involved (i) the collation and analysis of common indicator monitoring data to evaluate the progress and interim outcomes of the GRCF and (ii) interim process evaluation to ascertain which elements of delivery have worked well, which aspects have been challenging, and why. The outputs of Phase 2 are presented in the current report.
- Phase 3: Final evaluation (March 2022 – September 2022). As the final phase of the evaluation, it will focus primarily on answering the evaluation questions on outcomes and impact and value for money.

Figure 1.1 The evaluation will be delivered over three phases



Phase 1: Evaluation design

- Project initiation
- Design of evaluation framework and methodology

¹ ICF (2021). Evaluation of the Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF). Phase 1 Evaluation Design Report

Phase 2: Interim evaluation

- Monitoring data analysis
- Interim process evaluation

Phase 3: Final monitoring and evaluation

- Monitoring data analysis
- Final process, impact and VfM evaluation

1.2.2 Key evidence used to support the interim evaluation

1.2.2.1 Online survey of successful applicants

An online survey of successful applicants was conducted over four weeks in August 2021. A total of 49 responses were received: a 71% response rate (69 projects were funded in total). The survey included questions on project characteristics, the rationale for the GRCF, the application process for GRCF Round 1, the project start-up phase, project progress so far, project monitoring and evaluation, project legacy and what might have happened if projects had not received GRCF funding.

1.2.2.2 Online survey of unsuccessful applicants

An online survey of unsuccessful applicants was conducted over three weeks in August 2021 and was sent to 234 unsuccessful applicants (only those who did not reapply for GRCF Round 2 funding). A total of 77 responses were received: a 33% response rate. The survey was shorter than that for successful applicants, to encourage responses. It included questions on project characteristics, the rationale for the GRCF, the GRCF Round 1 application process, and whether applicants had managed to progress the project included in their applications through other means.

1.2.2.3 Interview programme with successful applicants

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 10 projects that received GRCF Round 1 funding. Interviews were undertaken between 9th August and 4th September 2021 by telephone or on MS Teams and typically lasted one hour. Interviews focussed on the rationale for the GRCF, experiences of the application process, progress to date and key challenges and obstacles. Analysis was conducted of interview transcripts (if recorded) and interviewer notes.

1.2.2.4 Interview programme with GRCF stakeholders

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 11 GRCF stakeholders – including Defra, The Heritage Fund, Environment Agency, Forestry Commission and Natural England. Interviews were undertaken between 13th and 31st August 2021, typically lasted one hour and were conducted by telephone or on MS Teams. Interviews focussed on the rationale for the GRCF, the application process, projects' progress to-date and lessons learnt. Interviews were recorded where permitted. Analysis was conducted of interview transcripts and interviewer notes.

1.2.2.5 Project monitoring data

GRCF funded projects are required to submit monitoring data to The Heritage Fund, using a structured online form with supporting guidance. The monitoring data

received was processed by The Heritage Fund and analysed by ICF. It provides information on the interim outputs and outcomes delivered by projects.

1.2.2.6 Existing research and data

Additional information and evidence were drawn from The Heritage Fund's GRCF programme documents and websites, and outputs from a series of lessons learnt sessions conducted by Defra and The Heritage Fund soon after the conclusion of the GRCF project start-up phase.

2 Evaluation findings: Was the GRCF delivered as intended?

2.1 The rationale for the GRCF

2.1.1 Introduction

This section examines the rationale for the GRCF. Specifically, it examines whether the rationale and approach of the GRCF was appropriate to the needs that Defra and The Heritage Fund had sought to address and what else might have been done within the GRCF timeframe. Evidence is primarily drawn from the surveys with successful and unsuccessful applicants and interviews with successful applicants and GRCF stakeholders.

The rationale for the GRCF was to respond to two key issues: environmental (and climate) priorities and the COVID-19 pandemic (specifically the financial impacts on the environmental NGO sector and wider labour market). The GRCF is intended to contribute to 25YEP goals by supporting projects that deliver against three environmental goals: nature conservation and restoration, nature-based solutions, and helping connect people with nature. In addition, the GRCF forms part of the Government's green economic recovery, jobs and skills package², and was designed to financially support eNGOs³ through the COVID-19 pandemic – with two economic goals: to sustain and build eNGO employment and financial stability.

2.1.2 Appropriateness of the GRCF to the needs of the eNGO sector and the environment

2.1.2.1 Overall view

Project applicants and GRCF stakeholders generally agreed that the GRCF was the right approach, seeking to balance the immediate financial needs of the sector resulting from COVID-19 with continuing funding for action against longer term environmental objectives. The tension between these twin goals, primarily due to the timeframes over which action for both is needed, was recognised. Unsuccessful applicants were less likely to agree that the GRCF was the right approach than were successful applicants.

The GRCF was highlighted as the primary funding source accessible to eNGOs at the time. This, and the significant level of overapplication to the GRCF, indicate that the GRCF could usefully have been a larger fund. The GRCF was considered less appropriate for some smaller eNGOs, who were less able to develop shovel ready projects and applications in the short time available.

² Defra (2020). Government's £40 million Green Recovery Challenge Fund opens for applications. [Press Release]. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/governments-40-million-green-recovery-challenge-fund-opens-for-applications>

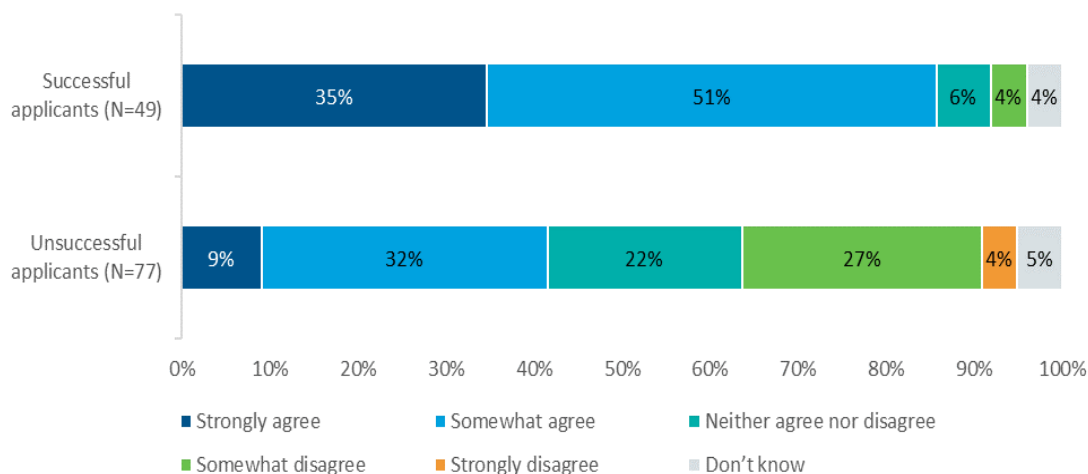
³ The GRCF was only open to eNGOs, or partnerships that included at least one eNGOs.

2.1.2.2 The nature of the funding made available through GRCF

eNGO stakeholder consultation⁴ helped shape the design of the GRCF. This consultation identified a need and preference for project-based funding, that would help sustain day-to-day work at risk from the impact of COVID-19. Consultation during the GRCF design phase indicated that there were a significant number of ‘shovel ready’ eNGO projects that could be rapidly implemented if funding were made available quickly.

The GRCF was generally seen as the right approach. The majority of successful applicants (86%) strongly or somewhat agreed that the GRCF offered the right approach to supporting the environment sector during the pandemic (Figure 2.1, Table 2.1). Unsuccessful applicants were less likely to agree that it was the right approach: 41% strongly or somewhat agreed whilst 31% strongly or somewhat disagreed.

Figure 2.1 To what extent do you agree that the GRCF offered the right approach to supporting the environment sector during the pandemic?



Source: ICF survey of successful projects; ICF survey of unsuccessful applicants

Table 2.1 To what extent do you agree that the GRCF offered the right approach to supporting the environment sector during the pandemic?

Agreement Level	Successful applicants (N=49)	Unsuccessful applicants (N=77)
Strongly agree	35%	9%
Somewhat agree	51%	32%
Neither agree nor disagree	6%	22%
Somewhat disagree	4%	27%
Strongly disagree	0%	4%
Don't know	4%	5%

Source: ICF survey of successful projects; ICF survey of unsuccessful applicants

The GRCF was the only meaningful source of funding available to eNGOs in 2020 and was therefore critical for sustaining many eNGOs. Many applicants found the environment sector was not able to access other COVID-19 support funding sources. Normal environment sector funding sources were either diminished or not

⁴ Including a Wildlife and Countryside Link survey of the natural environment sector.

available (e.g. reserve entry fees, car parking charges, trading income from shops and cafes, event fees) and other traditional funding streams were not available as they had been diverted to emergency streams or otherwise delayed. However for those who were not successful, the lack of alternatives (accentuated by bidding resource spend focussing on unsuccessful GRCF applications) has in some cases had a significant impact on their short-term viability. As a result, some unsuccessful applicants suggested that those who were unsuccessful should be prioritised in future GRCF rounds.

“We were excluded from many of the emergency funds either due to the nature of our work or because our reserves were deemed sufficient enough to see us through.” (Successful applicant)

“It has provided a lifeline to organisations conducting conservation projects.” (Successful applicant)

“The fund (the GRCF) was targeted at eNGOs who were all struggling to survive during the pandemic.” (Successful applicant)

“Without the funding during the pandemic our environmental Education Centre would have closed”. (Successful applicant)

“It did nothing for our small organisation that saw a 40k (25%) drop in income”. (Unsuccessful applicant)

“We’re now left with limited funding left & failed in securing new funding - now at risk from closure.” (Unsuccessful applicant)

Unsuccessful applicants⁵ from smaller eNGOs, in particular, felt the GRCF did not adequately take their needs into account, citing the administrative burden of resourcing the GRCF application process, the need to have shovel ready projects and the scale of grants offered. They often felt that too much of the GRCF funding had gone to large organisations and that spreading the funds more widely (by limiting funding to given to any single organisation or by awarding smaller grants) would have been better.

“It did not provide enough support for small, grassroots organisations like ourselves.” (Unsuccessful applicant)

“The GRCF focussed on organisations with ready defined projects - defining a new project in the timescales is very difficult. It therefore favoured bigger organisations with the previous capacity to prepare projects in advance.” (Unsuccessful applicant)

The GRCF offered the right type of funding. As project funding, the GRCF allowed eNGOs to create projects that took forward their existing work, establish new environmental programmes and continue to deliver environmental action. However some applicants thought that offering core rather than project funding would have been better. It was suggested that this would have better enabled them to continue existing activities, rather than having to expend resources designing or repackaging a new project. Particularly if combined with a longer time horizon for the funding, several applicants suggested that this would have a greater impact on the governance and resilience objectives for eNGOs. An additional suggestion was that tax breaks for investment could be offered.

⁵ ICF unsuccessful applicant survey, open comments

The GRCF did not satisfy the level of eNGO demand. The level of oversubscription was widely recognised and taken as evidence that the level of funding made available through the GRCF was not sufficient for the sector. Some felt that the £40million made available by the GRCF was well short of what was offered to other sectors.

2.1.2.3 Relevance of the GRCF goals

There is a tension between the twin goals of the GRCF - to address short-term economic impacts of the pandemic by spending money quickly whilst also addressing long term environmental goals which may be better supported through funding longer-term actions. Some applicants suggested that addressing both goals through the same fund was not compatible, particularly given the differing timelines over which each needed to be addressed – with pandemic-related impacts requiring short term funding and actions to address environmental issues better suited to longer term funding. However other applicants, and GRCF stakeholders, recognised that this was a necessary trade-off given both the pandemic and the environmental goals that needed to be addressed by the GRCF. Several applicants highlighted that the size of the GRCF was insufficient to impact meaningfully on the UK’s environmental and climate challenges and that more funding sustained over the longer term is needed.

It was generally welcomed that **the GRCF placed an emphasis on helping to retain jobs during the pandemic**, providing job security and preventing the potential loss of skills from the sector, rather than solely focussing on *new* job creation. However some applicants highlighted that the short-term nature of the funding would not result in a lasting impact on employment.

There was **a synergy** between the GRCF connecting people with nature goal and the increased demand and need for environment activities and engagement that occurred during the pandemic, particularly during periods of lockdowns and social distancing restrictions⁶. It was suggested that future funding could be focussed on helping eNGOs (and others, such as Local Authorities) manage the increased demand from the public for access to their sites.

“The importance of green-spaces for individual wellbeing came to the fore during the pandemic.” (Successful applicant)

“Lockdowns brought into sharp focus the disconnect between young people and their understanding of nature, the benefits this brings to their health, wellbeing and education. Providing support to organisations well placed to start tackling this issue at a time when they were unable to do so was crucial.” (Successful applicant)

“Capitalised on connection to nature many people had found was so important to them during Covid.” (Unsuccessful applicant)

2.1.3 Implications of the GRCF timeframes

2.1.3.1 Overall view

The speed with which the GRCF was designed and launched was generally commended by both applicants and GRCF stakeholders. Despite this, some

⁶ ICF successful and unsuccessful applicant surveys, open comments

considered the GRCF was still launched too late following the COVID-19 crisis. The short time period available to put project applications together – necessary to deliver money to eNGOs quickly – put significant pressure on some eNGOs and potentially disadvantaged smaller eNGOs. The 15-month period for project delivery – necessary to ensure money was spent quickly to support COVID-19 impacts on jobs and resilience – had both positive and negative impacts on project designs. Positive impacts included improving the delivery efficiency of project designs and sharpening the priorities of projects. Negative impacts included reducing the scale and ambition of projects. The combination of short application and project delivery periods also limited scope to support more complex and innovative projects.

2.1.3.2 Implications of the GRCF timeframes

The timeframes to design and launch the GRCF, to prepare applications and to deliver projects, were necessarily very short, given the immediate and short-term nature of COVID-19 support needed for the sector. One GRCF stakeholder recognised that compromises were made to ensure a rapid response and left the GRCF *'rough at the edges'*.

The speed at which the GRCF was administered was commended by many, particularly recognising that the process of developing a fund of this size can often take several years. Despite this, there was **mixed opinion about whether this was fast enough** to be responsive to the immediate impacts of COVID-19. Some interviewees suggested that the context for the GRCF had already changed by the time the money became available. This changing context might offer an opportunity to consider project extensions and a rebalancing of the short-term economic and longer-term environmental objectives.

Several applicants highlighted the challenges of the application timeframes. eNGOs found it difficult to draft applications in the time available, particularly in cases where they were already short-staffed due to COVID-19-related absences (illness and use of furlough) and adjusting to home working. In particular it was highlighted that smaller eNGOs were less likely to have suitable shovel ready projects that could be quickly packaged up for applications and had less resources available to develop project applications.

There were both positive and negative effects of adapting 'shovel ready' projects to fit the GRCF timeframes. Three quarters of successful applicants (76%⁷) had to adapt the design and scope of their pre-existing shovel ready project to make it deliverable within the time period permitted under the GRCF. Medium sized projects were more likely to have made positive changes and large projects more likely to have made negative changes (Figure 2.2, Table 2.2).

The main positive changes included compressing the project into a shorter timeframe than originally planned, which lowered costs, made delivering outputs more effective and focused the ambitions of the project on land areas or communities that need the most attention. One applicant mentioned the availability of the funding, given the lack of alternative options, allowed them to scale up their project and be more ambitious than planned.

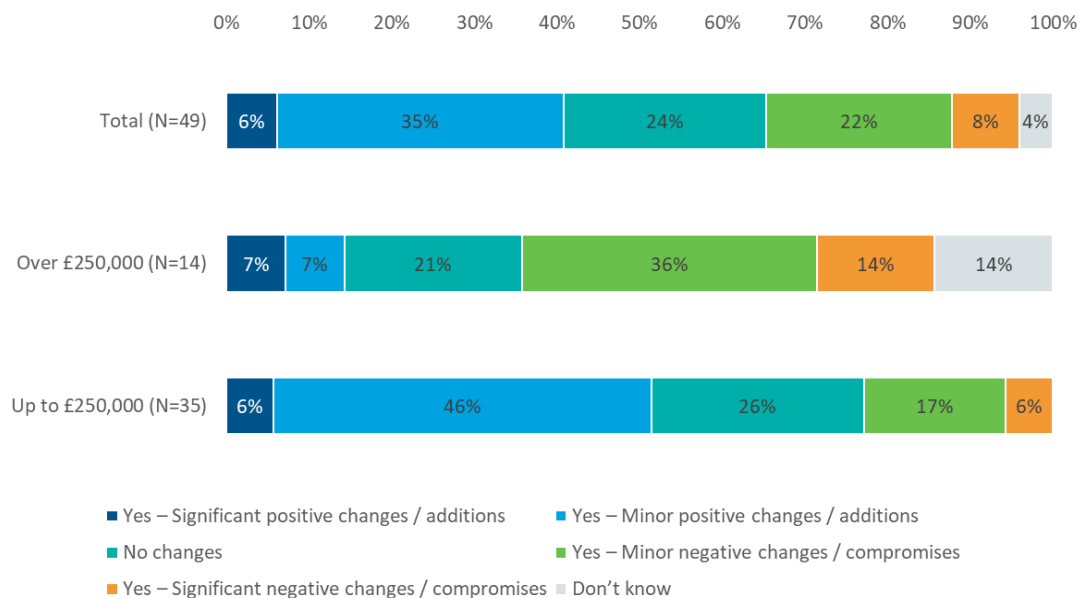
The main negative changes included reducing the scale and ambition of the project, including the need to align project ambitions with the constraints of the GRCF timeframe for seasonally-dependant activities, which reduced the extent of the

⁷ Successful applicant survey

project’s targeted outcomes (e.g. community engagement, tree planting) and therefore impacts.

A few interviewees mentioned that due to a lack of time – for project design and delivery - projects tended to follow established approaches, which may have **limited the scope for complex projects, partnership development and innovation**. This was, however, an accepted limitation of this funding.

Figure 2.2 Did you make any changes in the design and scope of your project in order to be able to deliver the project in full by March 2022?



Source: ICF successful applicant survey

Table 2.2 Did you make any changes in the design and scope of your project in order to be able to deliver the project in full by March 2022?

Yes – Significant positive changes / additions	6%	7%	6%
Yes – Minor positive changes / additions	35%	7%	46%
No changes	24%	21%	26%
Yes – Minor negative changes / compromises	22%	36%	17%
Yes – Significant negative changes / compromises	8%	14%	6%
Don't know	4%	14%	0%

Source: ICF successful applicant survey

2.2 The application and start-up process

2.2.1 Introduction

This section considers the GRCF application process, whether it was proportionate and how well it was perceived to work.

Pre-application, the GRCF was promoted to the sector. Advice to applicants included a webinar and FAQs – no formal channel for one-to-one advice pre-application was set up. The GRCF is a competitive fund and applicants were required to submit funding bids for GRCF project funding. Large projects⁸ were required to submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) prior to their full application. Applications were assessed against 12 criteria, covering points of eligibility and project quality, by The Heritage Fund and other GRCF stakeholders (Defra and the ALBs). GRCF Round 1 was heavily oversubscribed, with 69 projects awarded out of a total of 564 full applications. Successful applicants were notified by letter. The first disbursements of funds⁹ were provided upon project start.

2.2.2 The application phase

Overall view

Promotion of the GRCF reached a wide audience (as evidenced by the level of oversubscription), with most applicants hearing about the GRCF by word of mouth. Large projects and successful applicants were more likely to hear about the GRCF via Defra communication channels than The Heritage Fund channels, perhaps reflecting differences in eNGO and GRCF stakeholders' networks.

A high number of eNGOs expended resources on unsuccessful applications, which exacerbated challenges they faced during the pandemic. Greater market testing on potential demand was not undertaken due to the speed with which the GRCF was designed and launched. Future GRCF rounds should undertake market testing. Options for tightening application criteria should be considered (for example not allowing multiple applications from organisations) or sifting prospective applicants (without generating significant burdens for medium sized projects) to ensure that demand better matches the available funding.

Overall the application process was found to work well. For successful applicants the value of grants received was considered worth the resources committed to the application; unsuccessful applicants held more mixed views. The time to prepare applications was short due to speed with which the GRCF needed to be delivered. However many applicants found this short timescale challenging.

The majority of successful applicants considered the information provided to them by The Heritage Fund during the application phase to be useful, timely, accessible and readily available. However some applicants struggled with comprehension of the guidance. Guidance and training – offered to all before application stage – was well received and coherent across the GRCF stakeholder organisations. One-to-one advice and clarification advice was not offered; however some applicants able to contact The Heritage Fund found this support helpful. This has the potential to disadvantage other applicants who were not able receive similar advice.

⁸ Those seeking funding of over £250,000

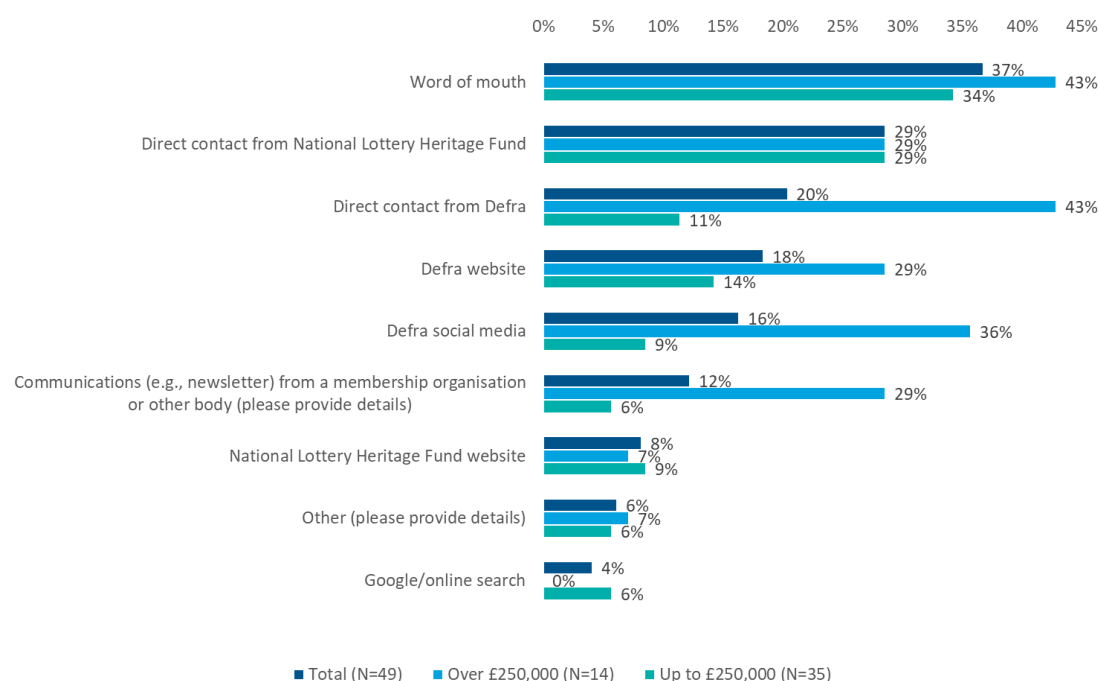
⁹ Medium projects were provided 50% of the grant at this point large projects were provided 25%.

Several projects received their permission to start later than they had planned. The most common cause was challenges putting in place the third-party landowner agreements required for GRCF funding.

2.2.2.1 Promotion of the GRCF

The most common route through which applicants heard about the GRCF was though word of mouth (37% and 34% of successful and unsuccessful applicants respectively). This was followed by direct contact with The Heritage Fund (29% and 22% of successful and unsuccessful applicants respectively). A greater proportion of large project successful applicants than medium project successful applicants heard about the GRCF through direct contact with Defra (43% compared to 11%), as did successful applicants compared to unsuccessful applicants (20% compared to 3%) (Figure 2.3, Table 2.3, Figure 2.4, Table 2.4). A smaller proportion of successful applicants heard about the GRCF through The Heritage Fund website than did unsuccessful applicants (8% compared to 22%). This may reflect **differences in the type of eNGOs reached by Defra and The Heritage Fund communication channels** – and differences in those eNGOs suitability or experience of applying for funding relating to the environmental goals of the GRCF.

Figure 2.3 How did you hear about the GRCF: large project successful applicants compared to medium project successful applicants



Note: percentages sum to greater than 100% as some respondents selected more than one source

Source: ICF successful and unsuccessful applicant surveys

Table 2.3 How did you hear about the GRCF: large project successful applicants compared to medium project successful applicants

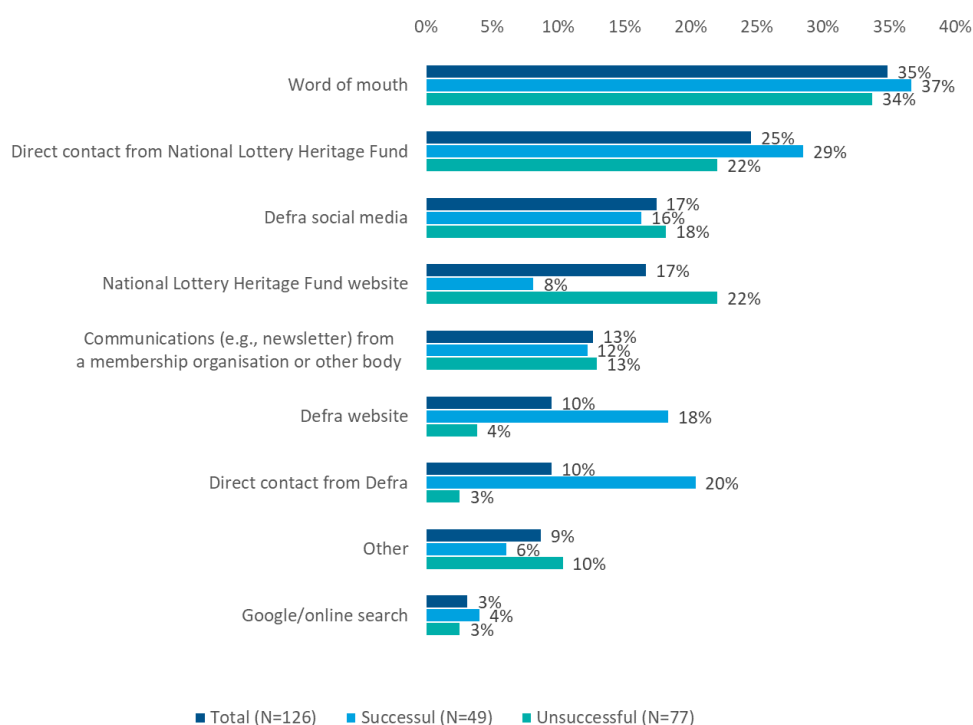
Response categories	Total (N=49)	Large projects (N=14)	Medium projects (N=35)
Word of mouth	37%	43%	34%

Response categories	Total (N=49)	Large projects (N=14)	Medium projects (N=35)
Direct contact from National Lottery Heritage Fund	29%	29%	29%
Direct contact from Defra	20%	43%	11%
Defra website	18%	29%	14%
Defra social media	16%	36%	9%
Communications (e.g., newsletter) from a membership organisation or other body (please provide details)	12%	29%	6%
National Lottery Heritage Fund website	8%	7%	9%
Other (please provide details)	6%	7%	6%
Google/online search	4%	0%	6%

Note: percentages sum to greater than 100% as some respondents selected more than one source

Source: ICF successful and unsuccessful applicant surveys

Figure 2.4 How did you hear about the GRCF: successful applicants compared to unsuccessful applicants



Note: percentages sum to greater than 100% as some respondents selected more than one source

Source: ICF successful and unsuccessful applicant surveys

Table 2.4 How did you hear about the GRCF: successful applicants compared to unsuccessful applicants

Response categories	Please tell us where you heard about the GRCF (N=77)
Word of mouth	34%
National Lottery Heritage Fund website	22%
Direct contact from National Lottery Heritage Fund	22%
National Lottery Heritage Fund social media	16%
Communications (e.g., newsletter) from a membership organisation or other body (please provide the name of the organisation)	13%
Defra website	4%
Defra social media	3%
Direct contact from Defra	3%
Google/online search	3%
Other (please specify)	10%

Note: percentages sum to greater than 100% as some respondents selected more than one source

Source: ICF successful and unsuccessful applicant surveys

2.2.2.2 The effort of the application process

The majority of **successful applicants felt the funding they received justified the effort** (92%) (Figure 2.5, Table 2.5).

However, some applicants, particularly unsuccessful applicants, considered the length of the application form excessive and many of the questions repetitive. A few applicants highlighted that they found the additional information documents that had to be submitted alongside application forms a burden. While all documents requested did form part of the assessment, some applicants felt that some of these could have been provided only after successful projects were selected.

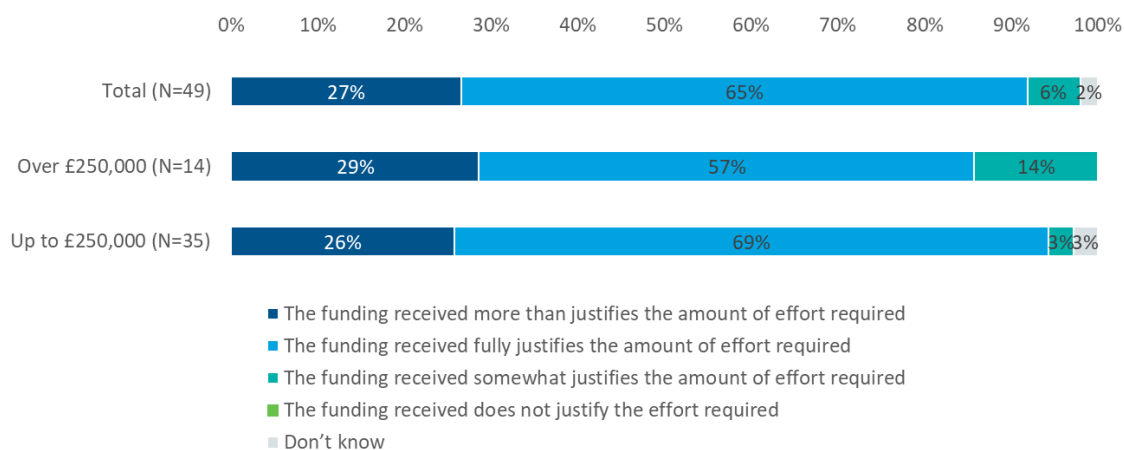
Given the purpose of GRCF to fill a temporary funding gap in the sector, **more could have been done to manage the level of over-application**. This could have reduced the number of organisations who in effect wasted resources putting in unsuccessful applications at a time when they were already stretched due to COVID-19-related challenges. It would have been beneficial if Defra had been able to undertake further market research on likely demand for the GRCF once the criteria were agreed¹⁰ – although the speed of GRCF design made this difficult.

Several unsuccessful applicants suggested that an Expression of Interest, or concept note, stage for medium size projects (like that for large projects) would have been beneficial. However others highlighted the absence of multiple application stages as a benefit – reducing bureaucracy and bidding effort. Other routes suggested to manage the level of overapplication to the GRCF included tightening the eligibility criteria or goals¹¹, and offering greater opportunity for informal feedback and iteration of potential project proposals.

¹⁰ This has been addressed in GRCF Round 2. The Heritage Fund Lessons Learned Document Round 2 – Setup and Launch Phase (unpublished)

¹¹ Although others also suggested broadening the criteria, for other purposes e.g. to provide access to GRCF for a broader range of environmental action providers.

Figure 2.5 On balance, was the amount of effort required to complete the application justified by the amount of funding you received from the GRCF? (Successful applicants)



Source: ICF successful applicant survey

Table 2.5 On balance, was the amount of effort required to complete the application justified by the amount of funding you received from the GRCF? (Successful applicants)

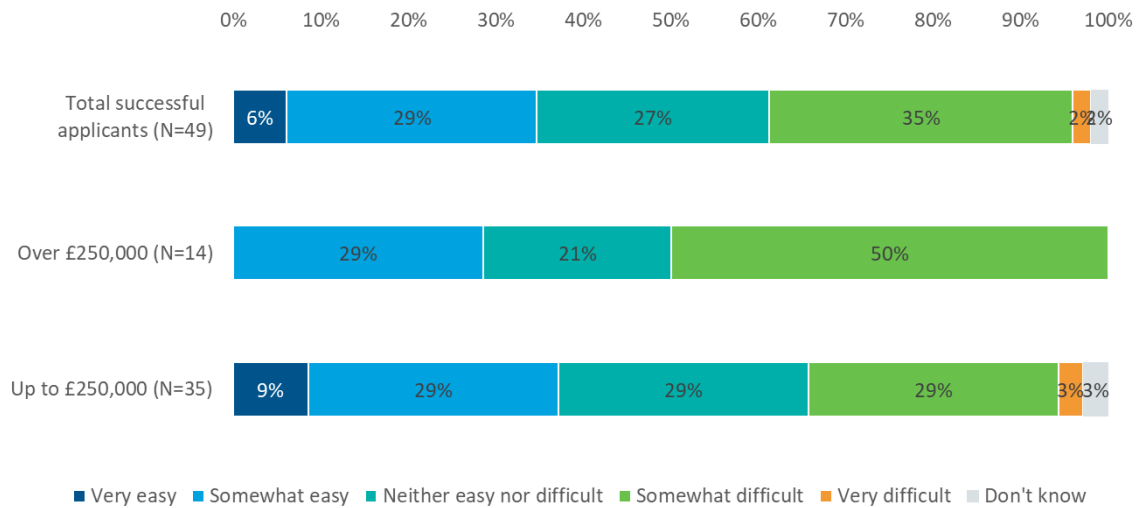
Response categories	Total (N=49)	Large projects (N=14)	Medium projects (N=35)
The funding received more than justifies the amount of effort required	27%	29%	26%
The funding received fully justifies the amount of effort required	65%	57%	69%
The funding received somewhat justifies the amount of effort required	6%	14%	3%
The funding received does not justify the effort required	0%	0%	0%
Don't know	2%	0%	3%

Source: ICF successful applicant survey

2.2.2.3 Effectiveness of the application process

There were **mixed views from successful applicants on how easy they found the application process** - 35% of survey respondents found it very or somewhat easy whilst 37% found it very or somewhat difficult (Figure 2.6, Table 2.6). **Unsuccessful applicant satisfaction with the application process was mixed**, with 43% either very or somewhat satisfied and 40% either somewhat or very dissatisfied (Figure 2.7, Table 2.7).

Figure 2.6 Successful applicant – how easy did you find the application process?



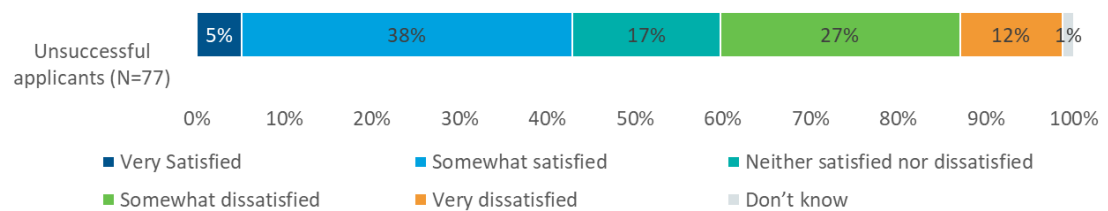
Source: ICF successful applicant survey

Table 2.6 Successful applicant – how easy did you find the application process?

Very easy	6%	0%	9%
Somewhat easy	29%	29%	29%
Neither easy nor difficult	27%	21%	29%
Somewhat difficult	35%	50%	29%
Very difficult	2%	0%	3%
Don't know	2%	0%	3%

Source: ICF successful applicant survey

Figure 2.7 Unsuccessful applicant – please indicate your overall satisfaction with the application process



Source: ICF unsuccessful applicant survey

Table 2.7 Unsuccessful applicant – please indicate your overall satisfaction with the application process

Very Satisfied	5%
Somewhat satisfied	38%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	17%
Somewhat dissatisfied	27%
Very dissatisfied	12%

Response categories	Unsuccessful applicants
Don't know	1%

Source: ICF unsuccessful applicant survey

By far the most commonly raised issue, across successful and unsuccessful applicants, was the limited time available for the application process. The need to develop bids with partners and the requirements regarding landowner agreements were cited as compounding this issue. Many applicants felt this compromised the quality of their application. It also created an intensive workload for those involved in application preparations, which was stressful for applicants. Some applicants felt the time pressures were particularly difficult for smaller eNGOs who may lack dedicated fund-raising time and resources and be less likely to have 'shovel ready' projects. One successful applicant stated that the application form was *"the same as a typical NLHF application which normally takes about 12 months from EoI acceptance to Stage 2 application and for this fund it was about 4-6 weeks, which means that not as much preparation could be undertaken"*.

The majority of successful applicants considered the information provided to them by The Heritage Fund during the application phase to be useful, timely, accessible and readily available (Figure 2.8, Table 2.8). Of these, the timeliness of the information performed the lowest – 10% of successful applicant respondents considered the timeliness of information to be somewhat or very poor.

Some applicants found specific aspects of the application process difficult. Some found the structure of the application forms and associated guidance confusing. In particular, that The Heritage Fund outcomes included in the application form were not a good match for the GRCF¹², making it difficult to adequately articulate the objectives of projects; and that in some cases applicants struggled to match the guidance to the questions – the 'help notes' supporting this issue were re-communicated to applicants during this stage to try to resolve the confusion. Due to the speed with which the GRCF was launched, there was insufficient time for the guidance to be tested with applicants¹³. Some specific challenges were raised by a few applicants regarding preparing and submitting project financial information and the State Aid declaration.

Successful applicants considered the GRCF eligibility criteria and project criteria to be clear (98% and 94% respectively considered the criteria to be very or somewhat clear)¹⁴. The drafting of the criteria was straightforward and supported by helpful guidance and consistent messaging from the different GRCF partners (e.g. Defra, The Heritage Fund)¹⁵. However, some unsuccessful applicants found aspects confusing – for example: whether the organisations had to be registered with the Charity Commission and whether Defra Arm's Length Body-partnered projects could apply.¹⁶

¹² Application forms were based on standard The Heritage Fund application forms

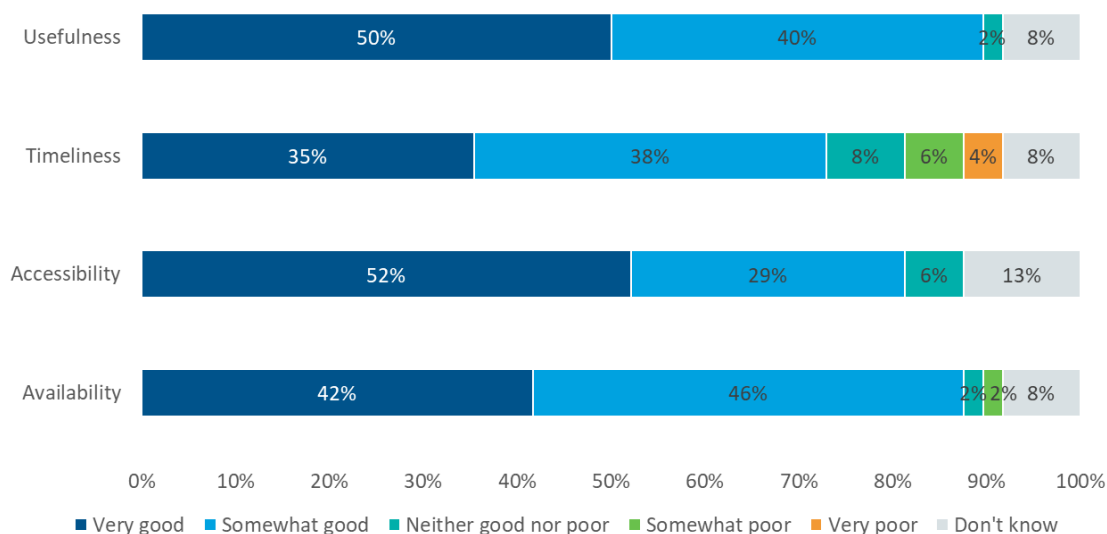
¹³ The Heritage Fund Lessons Learned Documents

¹⁴ Unsuccessful applicants were not asked specific questions on eligibility and selection criteria.

¹⁵ Interviews with successful applicants; The Heritage Fund Lessons Learned Documents

¹⁶ *ibid*

Figure 2.8 Please tell us how you found the information provided to you by The Heritage Fund prior to, and during, the application process (N=48) (Successful applicants only)



Source: ICF successful applicant survey

Table 2.8 Please tell us how you found the information provided to you by The Heritage Fund prior to, and during, the application process (N=48) (Successful applicants only)

Very good	42%	52%	35%	50%
Somewhat good	46%	29%	38%	40%
Neither good nor poor	2%	6%	8%	2%
Somewhat poor	2%	0%	6%	0%
Very poor	0%	0%	4%	0%
Don't know	8%	13%	8%	8%

Source: ICF successful applicant survey

The information made available to all prior to application was good. However some applicants were able to get additional one-to-one advice and clarifications. At the pre-application stage, many applicants reported that the webinars were helpful and clear and the process allowed refinement of their proposed projects. One GRCF stakeholder mentioned that there was training provided for applicants and the Q&A as part of this training was well received. One-to-one pre-application support was not offered by The Heritage Fund, due to the short timeframes for GRCF delivery, meaning applicants were not given the opportunity for advisory feedback to support iteration of their applications¹⁷. Several applicants indicated that this would have been helpful. However some applicants were able to obtain one-to-one advice and clarifications through their personal networks and existing contacts, which they reported as being very helpful. If one-to-

¹⁷ Something that The Heritage Fund do normally offer, under normal application conditions.

one support cannot be offered to all, then it may be considered unfair for it to be available on this basis.

The Heritage Fund portal for applications worked well, but there were some challenges. It was beneficial to many applicants who are used to navigating the portal but caused confusion among others. Many applicants were positive on the experience of using the portal, finding it easy to navigate and helpful that they could save and return to applications as they development different sections. However some had challenges navigating the portal and found it difficult to use and needed to copy and paste text from separate documents The most commonly raised issue was that the portal crashed close to the submission deadline which proved very stressful for applicants. However the issue was quickly resolved by The Heritage Fund.

Several unsuccessful applicants were disappointed that they had **not received any feedback on the applications**. In all cases they felt they had submitted good projects and did not seem to understand why they had been unsuccessful. This appears to have generated some feeling of resentment. For the GRCF, feedback was only provided for large grants, however it would have been valuable to a wider range of applicants.

2.2.2.4 Permission to start

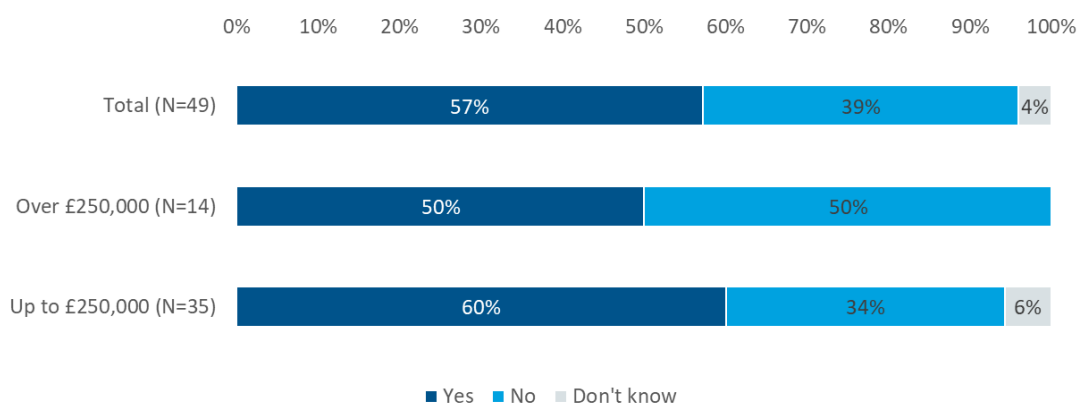
The **permission to start phase was conducted over a shorter period than is normal** for programmes administered by The Heritage Fund. There was a mixed response from successful applicants on the timeliness of receiving the permission to start letter from The Heritage Fund. The slight majority (57%) of successful applicants received their permission to start as quickly as they had anticipated, but 39% did not.

The most common cause of delays was delays in negotiations and contractual processes conducted with the owners of land on which projects were to undertake activities. Some projects had issues with consents, for example, one project on tenanted land had not engaged in discussions with tenants, which could have been picked up on earlier as it was crucial to the project start up. Some projects misunderstood the need to be fully ready to deliver and were not aware that although they may have verbal agreements from landowners, these needed to be written agreements before work could start. Some projects underestimated the scale of work involved, mostly at the contractual stage.

Due to the short timeframe, **The Heritage Fund was flexible in its approach** and allowed a phased start-up approach, where projects could start their work on other sites if consents were outstanding elsewhere, and initial upfront payments were expedited.)¹⁸.

¹⁸ Implications of start-up delays are discussed in Section 0

Figure 2.9 Did you receive permission to start from The Heritage Fund as quickly as you had anticipated?



Source: ICF successful applicant survey

Table 2.9 Did you receive permission to start from The Heritage Fund as quickly as you had anticipated?

	Yes	No	Don't know
Yes	57%	50%	60%
No	39%	50%	34%
Don't know	4%	0%	6%

Source: ICF successful applicant survey

2.3 GRCF project monitoring and evaluation

2.3.1 Introduction

This section considers the GRCF project monitoring and evaluation requirements, whether they are deliverable and how useful they are. Project evaluation requirements are not considered in detail at this stage.

Successful applicants are required to collect and share information with The Heritage Fund to enable the GRCF programme to be monitored and evaluated. Large projects are required to submit a monitoring report each quarter; medium projects report at the mid-point of the programme and all projects on completion. Projects must also provide monitoring data on project activities and outputs including nature conservation restoration and NBS (area/type of land, tree planting, type/condition of target species), connecting people with nature (visitor infrastructure, people visiting, volunteers) and resilience and employment (employment, skills), following monitoring guidance provided by The Heritage Fund¹⁹. Projects are required to deliver a project evaluation report at the end of the GRCF programme period.

¹⁹ The Heritage Fund (2021) GRCF – Monitoring Requirements for Funded Projects.

2.3.2 Project monitoring and evaluation requirements

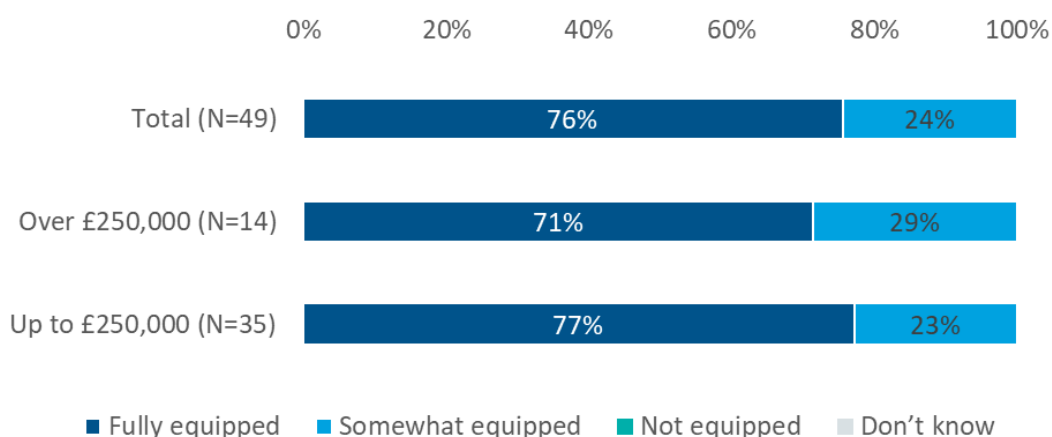
2.3.2.1 Overall view

Projects consider themselves equipped to deliver GRCF progress reports and evaluation obligations. Additional output and outcomes monitoring requirements were made at the beginning of the GRCF period and 64 out of 69 projects were able to submit data for the first full reporting period – however providing the guidance for this additional monitoring data earlier would have been beneficial (for project planning and potentially for the quality of data). The monitoring data supports tracking of project progress. Requesting output forecasts (at application stage) for more of the indicators subsequently used in monitoring would enhance this function. The GRCF is delivering outcomes over the longer-term – however as a programme limited to 15 months, the focus of the monitoring on observable outputs and shorter-term outcomes is appropriate.

2.3.2.2 Deliverability of monitoring and evaluation requirements

The majority of successful applicants (76%) felt fully equipped to deliver the progress reports and evaluations and 24% somewhat equipped. No projects indicated they felt unequipped (Figure 2.10, Table 2.10). A GRCF stakeholder noted that project monitoring and evaluation was supported by dedicated project case officers and external mentors.

Figure 2.10 To what extent is your project equipped to deliver the progress reports and evaluations?



Source: ICF successful applicant survey

Table 2.10 To what extent is your project equipped to deliver the progress reports and evaluations?

Response categories	Total (N=49)	Large projects (N=14)	Medium projects (N=35)
Fully equipped	76%	71%	77%
Somewhat equipped	24%	29%	23%
Not equipped	0%	0%	0%
Don't know	0%	0%	0%

Source: ICF successful applicant survey

2.3.2.3 Additional output and outcome monitoring

The first full submission of additional monitoring data by the projects took place in July 2021. **Submissions were received from 64 of the 69 projects.** An app was developed by The Heritage Fund for monitoring data submissions. The Heritage Fund provided support to the projects to ensure they could use the app, including interpretation of the monitoring guidance. The Heritage Fund reported that the majority of projects were able to use the app without any additional support²⁰.

Some projects stated that it would have been **useful to have received the guidance earlier**, as they were already developing their own monitoring framework. In one example a project had already started collecting data and were concerned it might not be compatible with the requirements of The Heritage Fund monitoring guidance.

2.3.2.4 Usefulness of monitoring data

Project monitoring data – of outputs and outcomes – supports tracking of project delivery progress as well as evaluation of GRCF impact.

Combined with intelligence from project case officers, this evaluation and other informal communications, the monitoring data will help track project progress and guide The Heritage Fund in its ongoing support for projects operating under the GRCF. **Two aspects limit the usefulness of the monitoring data:** the number of indicators that match those presented by projects in their applications and changes made to project delivery programmes as a result of COVID-19 lockdown and social distancing restrictions in early 2021. Many projects have shifted delivery of some types of outputs from the first to second half of the GRCF period.

For most projects, the outcomes that they aim to deliver will not be observable during the GRCF period e.g. trees planted take time to grow and reach their full ecosystem service potential. This issue was well recognised by GRCF stakeholders and **justified the approach of collecting monitoring data on outputs and shorter-term outcomes**, which are expected to be observable during the GRCF period. Many projects intend to continue monitoring their activities and sites over the longer term and there is an opportunity for Defra/The Heritage Fund to set up a longer-term monitoring and evaluation plan if it were considered valuable.

²⁰ The Heritage Fund (2021). Personal communication. September 2021

3 Evaluation findings: Is the GRCF on track to achieve its intended outcomes?

3.1 Introduction

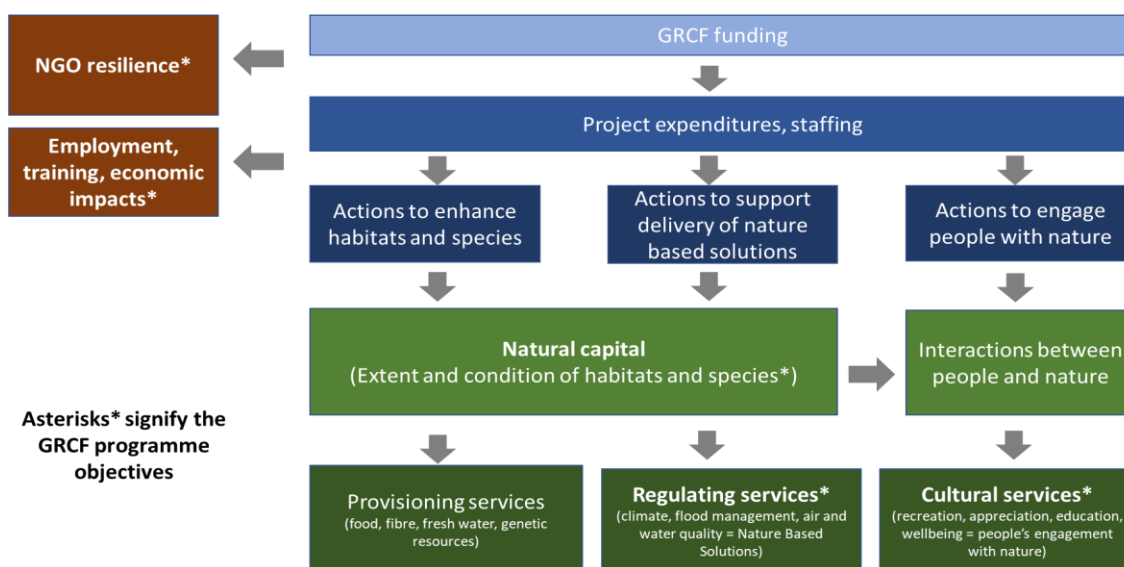
This section examines the progress of GRCF projects, including analysis of project monitoring data and comparing this to projects’ own projections (from application forms) where available.

The GRCF has five core goals: (i) nature conservation and restoration, (ii) nature-based solutions, (iii) connecting people with nature, (iv) employment and skills and (v) resilience of eNGOs. The GRCF theory of change (Figure 3.1) summarises how the activities to be completed by the 69 funded projects will contribute to achieving these five goals. More detailed theories of change are provided in the GRCF Evaluation Phase 1 report (ICF, 2021).

Most of the GRCF projects intend to deliver against multiple GRCF goals, and there are strong connections between actions targeting one or other of the goals. Both the nature conservation and restoration and nature-based solutions goals involve investments in the creation, restoration and maintenance of natural capital assets, which deliver benefits both for biodiversity (habitats and species) and people (ecosystem services). Most projects contributing to these objectives also have an element of engaging people with nature. Even if the focus is primarily on nature conservation/ restoration or nature-based solutions, projects may engage volunteers in land management, work with land managers and other stakeholders in pursuit of their objectives, raise public awareness and engage the public to build support for conservation action, or allow people access to the habitats created or restored. All projects will also contribute in some way to the GRCF objectives of jobs and skills, and eNGO resilience and sustainability.

GRCF projects were required to estimate the likely scale of outputs and outcomes expected to be delivered against each theme in their applications. Monitoring data, collected by the projects and submitted to The Heritage Fund illustrate their progress.

Figure 3.1 GRCF Programme summary Theory of Change



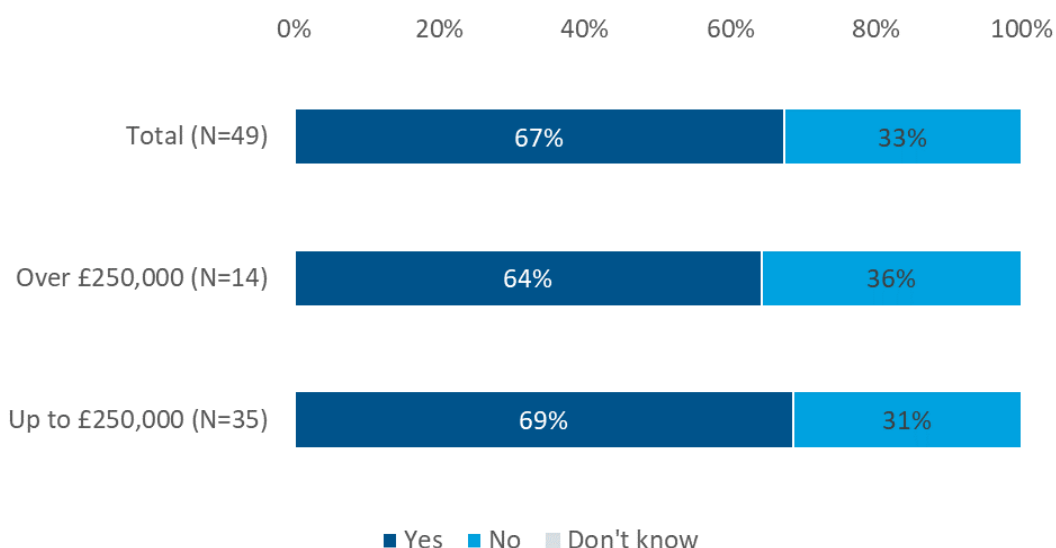
The diagram shows that GRCF funding, through project expenditure, staff and actions will enhance nature capital and interactions between people and nature, resulting in benefits for people through provisioning, regulating and cultural ecosystem services. In addition, the diagram shows that GRCF funding and project activities lead to improved NGO resilience and employment.

3.2 Overview of progress and challenges

Approximately two-thirds of projects (large and medium, Figure 3.2, Table 3.1) stated that they were able to start the project in-line with their expectations at application stage. Where projects were not able to do so, survey respondents reported four key consequences:

- Ability to meet goals compromised
- Ability to meet targets compromised
- Reduced project ambition
- Impact on recruitment

Figure 3.2 Once you received permission to start from The Heritage Fund, were you able to start your project in the timescale indicated in your application?



Source: ICF survey of successful projects

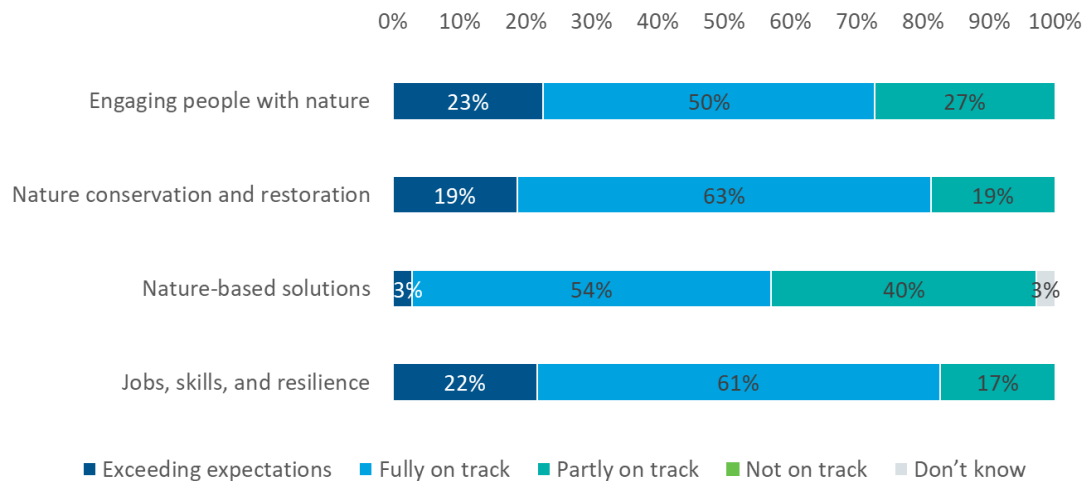
Table 3.1 Once you received permission to start from The Heritage Fund, were you able to start your project in the timescale indicated in your application?

Response categories	Total (N=49)	Large projects (N=14)	Medium projects (N=35)
Yes	67%	64%	69%
No	33%	36%	31%
Don't know	0%	0%	0%

Source: ICF survey of successful projects

The extent to which projects felt they are on track to reach their intended outcomes varied across the GRCF objectives (Figure 3.3, Table 3.2). Respondents were most positive about the conservation and restoration and jobs, skills and resilience objectives, with 82% and 83% respectively indicating they were either exceeding expectations or fully on track. Respondents were least positive on the nature-based solutions objective, with only 57% indicating they were exceeding expectations or fully on track.

Figure 3.3 To what extent do you think your project is on track to achieve its intended outcomes: (N=49)



Source: ICF survey of successful projects

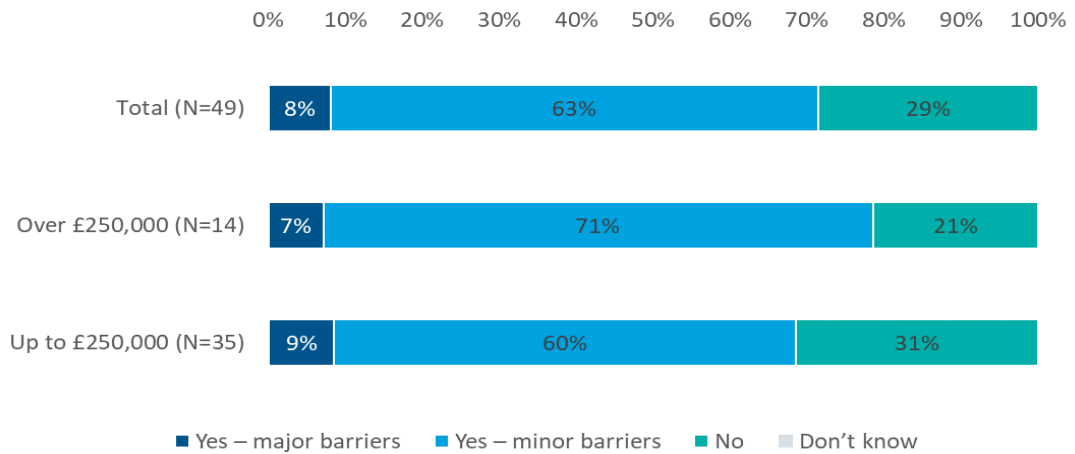
Table 3.2 To what extent do you think your project is on track to achieve its intended outcomes: (N=49)

Response categories	Engaging people with nature outcomes	Nature conservation and restoration outcomes	Nature-based solutions outcomes	Jobs, skills, and resilience outcomes
Exceeding expectations	23%	19%	3%	22%
Fully on track	50%	63%	54%	61%
Partly on track	27%	19%	40%	17%
Not on track	0%	0%	0%	0%
Don't know	0%	0%	3%	0%

Source: ICF survey of successful projects

The majority of projects have faced barriers and challenges in delivering their project activities, but only 8% of respondents indicated that these were major (Figure 3.4, Table 3.3). By far the most commonly identified reason for projects not being on track to achieve their target outcomes was COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns experienced post grant award.

Figure 3.4 Have you faced any barriers or challenges in delivering project activities so far?



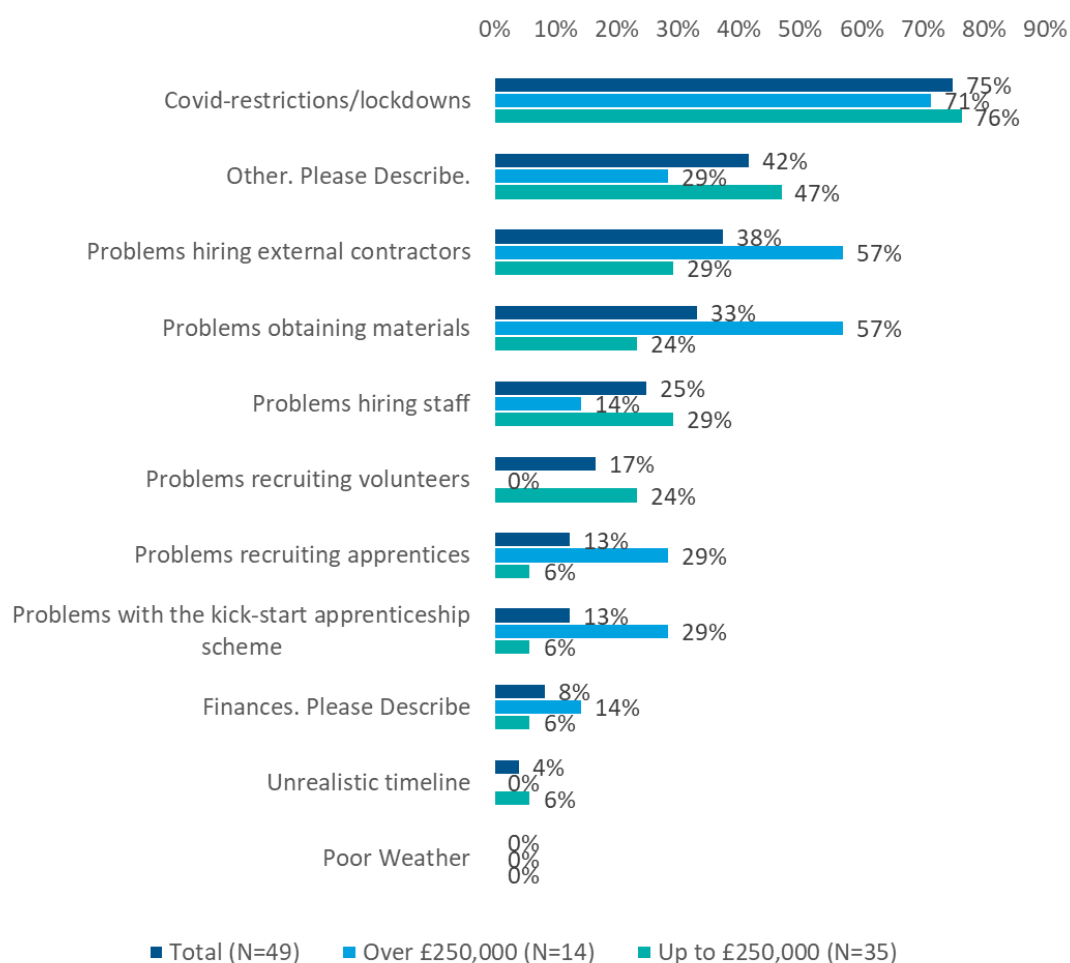
Source: ICF survey of successful projects

Table 3.3 Have you faced any barriers or challenges in delivering project activities so far?

Response categories	Total (N=49)	Large projects (N=14)	Medium projects (N=35)
Yes – major barriers	8%	7%	9%
Yes – minor barriers	63%	71%	60%
No	29%	21%	31%
Don't know	0%	0%	0%

Source: ICF survey of successful projects

Figure 3.5 What has caused your project to stray off-course from its intended outcomes?



Source: ICF survey of successful projects

Table 3.4 What has caused your project to stray off-course from its intended outcomes?

Response categories	Total (N=49)	Large projects (N=14)	Medium projects (N=35)
Covid-restrictions/lockdowns	75%	71%	76%
Other. Please Describe.	42%	29%	47%
Problems hiring external contractors	38%	57%	29%
Problems obtaining materials	33%	57%	24%
Problems hiring staff	25%	14%	29%
Problems recruiting volunteers	17%	0%	24%
Problems recruiting apprentices	13%	29%	6%
Problems with the kick-start apprenticeship scheme	13%	29%	6%
Finances. Please Describe	8%	14%	6%
Unrealistic timeline	4%	0%	6%
Poor Weather	0%	0%	0%

Source: ICF survey of successful projects

3.3 Nature conservation and restoration and nature-based solutions

Overall view

Projects generally think they are on track to exceed or achieve their goals for nature conservation and restoration but are less confident on nature-based solution goals.

Environmental actions have taken place on 121 sites around England, providing habitat restoration and creation, species protection and nature-based solutions across upwards of 0.3 million hectares. Over half of the sites are providing actions on land with conservation designations, particularly SSSIs. The most common BAP habitats targeted by actions are lowland mixed deciduous woodland, rivers and hedgerows.

Tree planting has so far taken place on 56 sites around England, planting nearly 106,000 trees. Whilst this represents only 13% of the total number expected based on project applications, many projects have faced delays as they were not able to get their project activities up and running fast enough at the beginning of the GRCF programme to meet the seasonal window for tree planting. It is therefore likely that the number of trees planted will increase greatly by the end of the programme period.

The most common challenges faced by projects to date include: securing land agreements and consents (particularly for multi-site projects), seasonal windows for activities being missed, relationship challenges with key stakeholders, availability of staff (due to COVID-19), as well as a general shortage of contractors and materials.

3.3.1 Progress to-date

3.3.1.1 Area of land benefiting from environmental actions

GRCF projects provided estimates of the area of land that was directly benefiting from their environmental actions on habitat creation and restoration²¹. In total, approximately 1.6million hectares of land has directly benefited from GRCF funded nature conservation and restoration and nature-based solution activities to-date (Table 3.5). Of this 1.6 million, one project - Restoring biodiversity: building a mink-free East Anglia – accounts for 1.3 million hectares. The project covers the whole of Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. Excluding this project, approximately 0.3million hectares of land is estimated to have directly benefited from GRCF activities to-date.

The North-West is the region with the greatest number of sites directly benefiting, although the East of England has the three largest sites by area (Figure 3.6). Habitat creation activity has been greatest in the North West, whilst habitat restoration activity has been greatest in the East of England (Figure 3.7).

²¹ i.e. the area of land over which activities were delivered.

Table 3.5 Area of land directly benefiting from environmental action (ha)

Responses	Total Direct land*	Direct creation	Direct restoration
Total number of sites	121	52	55
Total area (all activities)	1,600,000	232,000	1,500,000
Total area (excluding largest 3 sites)	278,789	232,267	188,593
Mean area per site	13,000	4,500	27,000
Median area per site	3	1	25
Min site area	<1	<1	<1
Max site area	554,000	64,000	554,000
Max site area (excluding largest 3 sites)	63,500	63,500	51,799

Note: Reported totals may be an under or overestimate of the true area of land benefiting from environmental activity. There is missing data (from some projects overall and for some project sites), which results in likely underestimation. However many activities reported for a single site may be undertaken on the same area of land, but it was not possible to identify for which records this might occur – therefore, if a project provided area data for multiple activities on a site, these areas were counted only once if they were reported to cover the same hectares of land, and summed if they were reported as covering different hectare areas - which results in a likely overestimation.

** Direct creation + direct restoration sums to >total direct land. Some project activities were reported as providing both creation and restoration activities over the same area – in such cases the area is included as both ‘direct creation’ data and ‘direct restoration’, but only once in the ‘total direct land’.*

Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

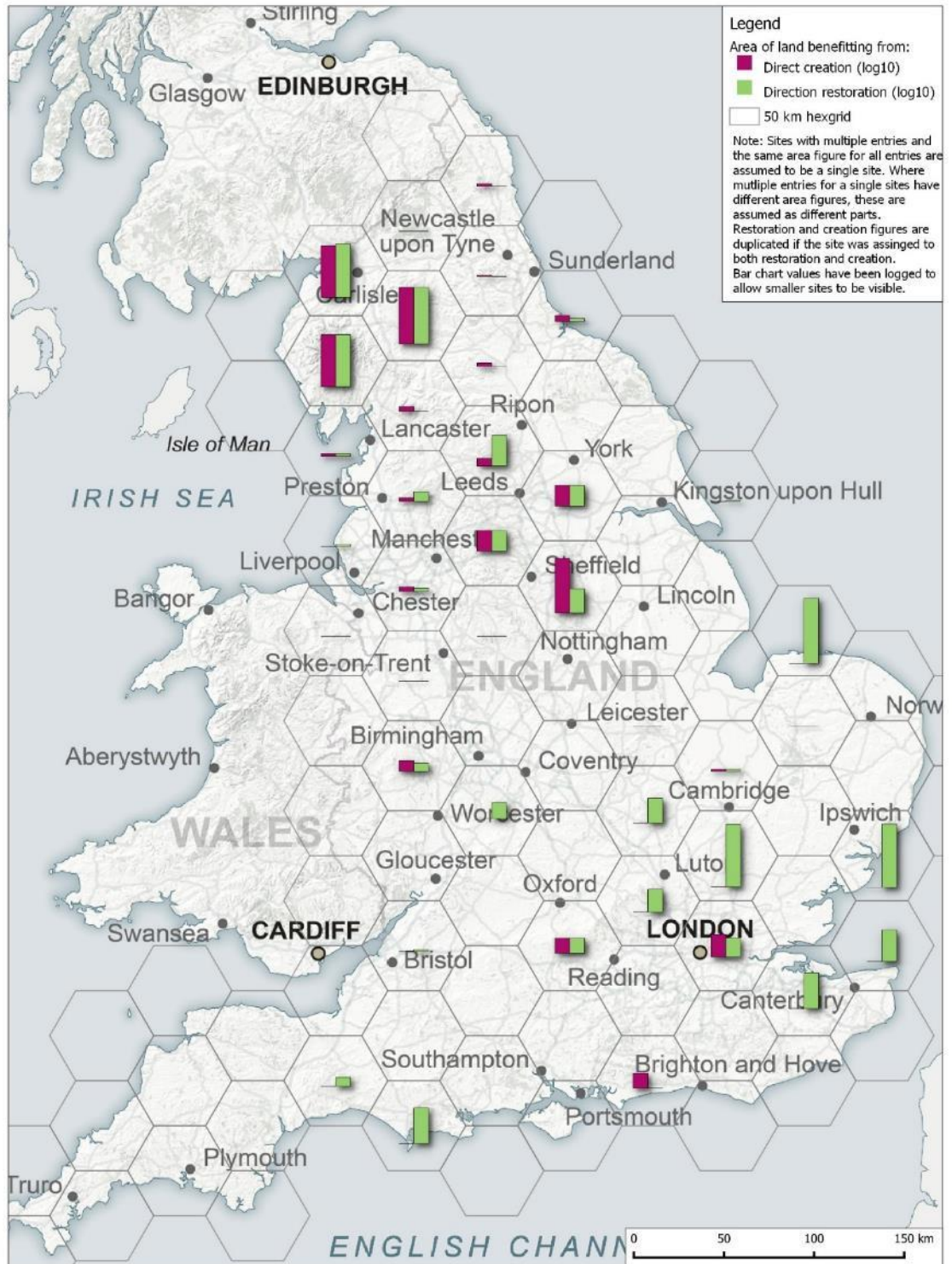
Figure 3.6 Area of land directly benefiting from environmental action, by GRCF project site



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Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

Figure 3.7 Area of land directly benefiting from environmental action, by 50km hexgrid



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* Hexagonal 50km cells with a central bar chart to show the area of land benefitting from direct habitat creation and restoration activities, summed for all GRCF project sites located within the cell

Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

3.3.1.2 Designations and condition

Environmental action is taking place on areas of land inside and outside conservation designations (Table 3.6). Sites of Special Scientific Interest are the designation type most frequently overlapping with GRCF project sites. Just two project sites overlap with marine designations. The majority of environmental action is taking place on sites deemed to currently be in unfavourable condition; particularly unfavourable - recovering condition (Table 3.7).

Table 3.6 Conservation designation of GRCF project sites benefiting from environmental actions

Conservation designation	Number of sites	% of all sites*
No Designation	72	44
Sites of Special Scientific Interest	31	19
Special Areas of Conservation	17	10
Protected by an Act of Parliament	14	8
Local Nature Reserves	13	8
Local Wildlife Sites	13	8
Special Protection Areas	11	7
National Nature Reserves	8	5
Ramsar	6	4
Marine Conservation Zone	2	1
No response	32	19

* Sum to >100% as some project sites reported >1 designation

Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

Table 3.7 Condition of sites receiving beneficial environmental action

Site condition	Number of sites
Favourable	53
Unfavourable – recovering	63
Unfavourable – no change	9
Unfavourable – declining	10
Destroyed (partially/completely)	2

Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

GRCF projects reported undertaking beneficial actions across over 30 different UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UK BAP) priority habitats. Table 3.8 shows that three habitats - Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland, Rivers, and Hedgerows – have received particular attention through GRCF projects. In addition to BAP habitats, the other habitat types most frequently reported by projects as benefiting from environmental actions were other woodland and amenity grassland²².

Table 3.8 BAP habitats being targeted by projects, by number of environmental actions, number of sites where the habitat is present and number of

²² ICF analysis of open text responses on other non-BAP priority habitats

GRCF projects within which those sites/actions sit (presented high to low by number of actions)

BAP Habitat	Number of actions	Number of sites	Number of projects
Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland	54	21	9
Rivers	47	38	7
Hedgerows	40	17	9
Lowland Heathland	29	16	6
Wood-Pasture & Parkland	29	13	5
Native Pine Woodlands	26	10	2
Wet Woodland	25	9	2
Lowland Beech and Yew Woodland	24	8	1
Upland Birchwoods	24	8	1
Upland Mixed Ashwoods	24	8	1
Upland Oakwood	24	8	1
Lowland Meadows	21	12	6
Ponds	15	8	5
Reedbeds	15	8	6
Purple Moor Grass and Rush Pastures	12	4	3
Blanket Bog	10	4	2
Lowland Fens	10	3	2
Upland Flushes, Fens and Swamps	10	4	2
Traditional Orchards	9	3	2
Lowland Raised Bog	8	4	3
Upland Hay Meadows	8	2	1
Upland Heathland	8	2	1
Coastal and Floodplain Grazing Marsh	6	2	2
Lowland Calcareous Grassland	6	3	2
Lowland Dry Acid Grassland	6	3	3
Arable Field Margins	4	2	2
Coastal saltmarsh	4	3	2
Upland Calcareous Grassland	4	2	1
Calaminarian Grasslands	3	1	1
Intertidal mudflats	2	2	1
Open Mosaic Habitats on Previously Developed Land	2	1	1
Seagrass beds	2	2	2
Aquifer Fed Naturally Fluctuating Water Bodies	1	1	1
Eutrophic Standing Waters	1	1	1

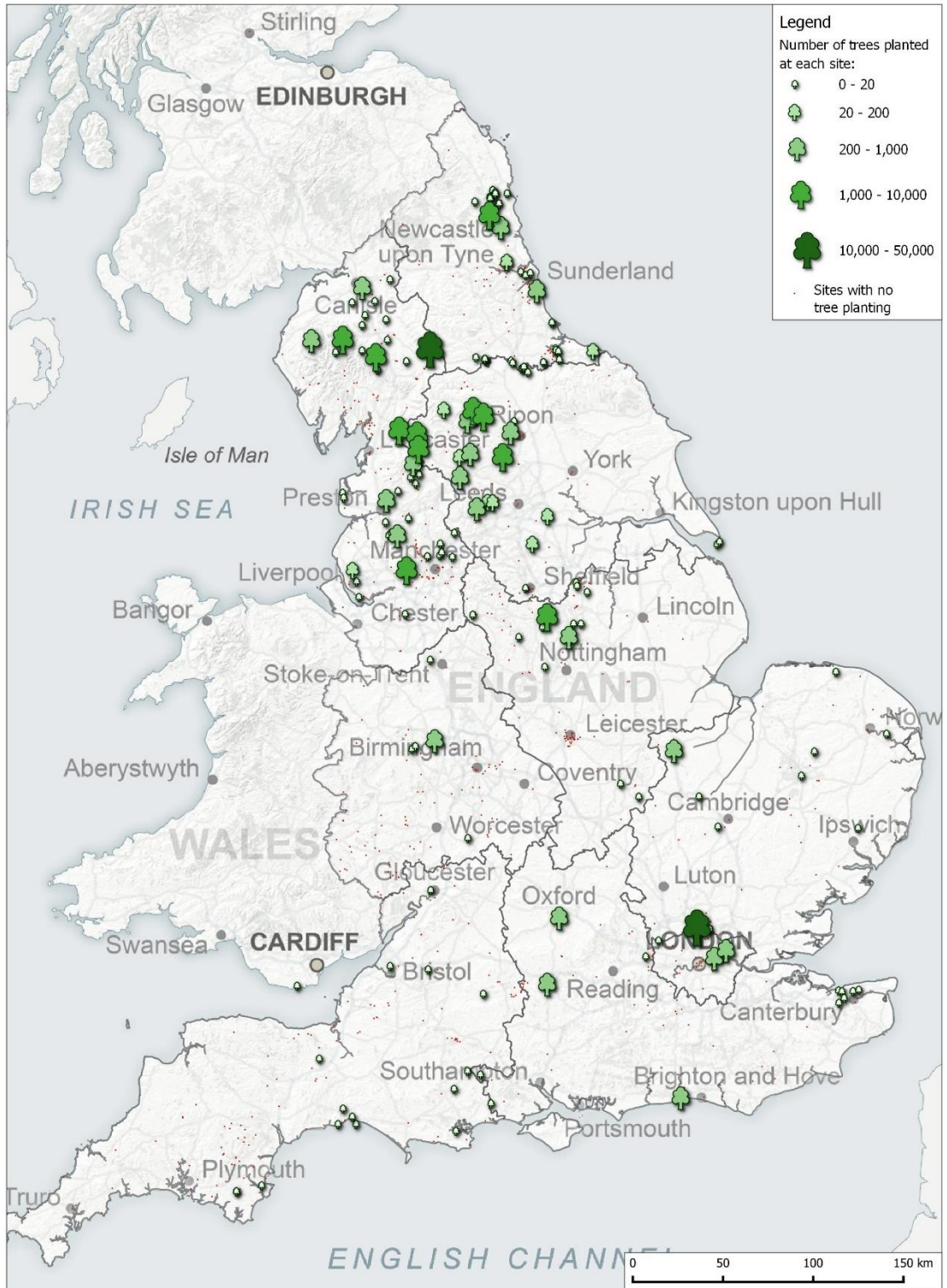
Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

3.3.1.3 Trees

Tree planting has so far taken place on 56 sites around England, planting nearly 106,000 trees. Figure 3.8 shows the distribution of trees planted to date across England. The greatest number of trees have been planted in London (51,000)²³ followed by the North West (26,000).

²³ One project, which reported it has planted 50,000 trees to-date, accounts for nearly all trees planted in London.

Figure 3.8 Approximate number of trees planted at each site to-date



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Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

3.3.1.4 Species

In addition to reporting on habitat type, projects were asked if their conservation actions were targeted to support specific individual species. 14 projects reported that they are working in this way.

Conservation actions submitted by these projects have targeted several species. The red squirrel has benefited from the highest number of conservation actions, although further analysis would be needed to fully understand the scale of these actions. Each species below is being targeted by one project, with some projects targeting multiple species. Table 3.9 details the number of project conservation actions benefiting different species.

This does not reflect the full scope of species benefiting from the GRCF as a whole, or the conservation actions where multiple species were targeted and/or would benefit.

Table 3.9 Species targeted by GRCF projects, by number of conservation actions

Species	Number of beneficial conservation actions
Red squirrels	16
Curlew	7
Salmon; sea trout	6
Barn Owl	5
Greater horseshoe bat	4
Water Vole	4
Black grouse	2
Lesser horseshoe bat	2
Pool frog	2
salmon, sea trout	2
Dragonflies	1
Glow-worm	1
Great crested newt	1
Green winged orchid	1
Green winged orchid; Shrill carder bee	1
Grey seals	1
Lesser horseshoe bat; greater horseshoe bat	1
Native Oyster	1
Nightingale	1
Reed Warbler	1
Salmon	1
Seagrass	1
Willow tit	1

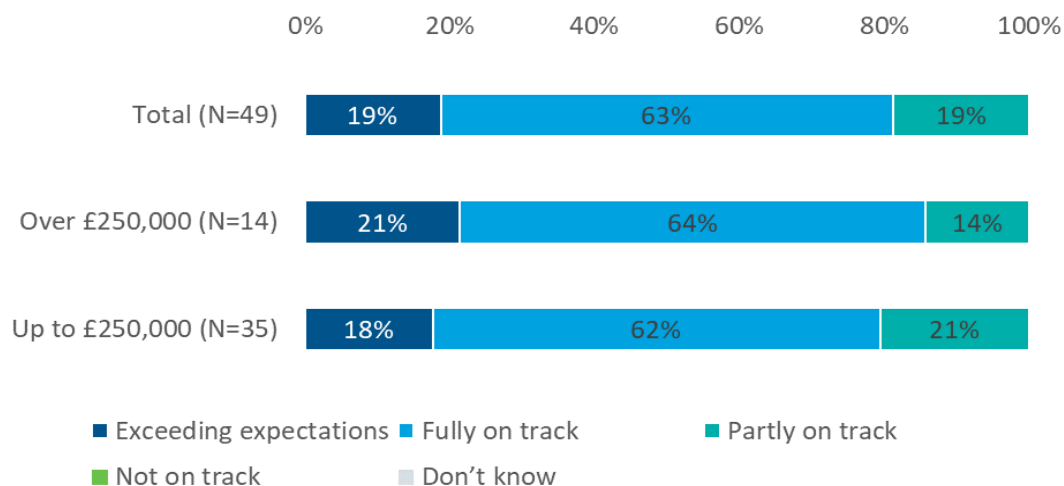
Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return (data for 14 GRCF projects)

3.3.2 Progress compared to projections

For both conservation and restoration and nature-based solution outcomes, the majority of projects indicated that they are either exceeding expectations or fully on track to meet their intended outcomes (Figure 3.9, Figure 3.10, Table 3.10, Table 3.11). Survey respondents were more positive about progress on conservation and restoration outcomes than nature-based solution outcomes. None reported that they were 'not on track'.

Only one monitoring indicator – number of trees planted – provides a comparison to the estimated projection provided in project applications. To-date 13% of the projected numbers of trees to be planted using GRCF funding have been delivered – 106,000 compared to a target of nearly 800,000 (Table 3.11). Medium projects have achieved a higher proportion of their target numbers (32%) than large projects (10%). By region (Table 3.12), tree planting activity has exceeded targets in London²⁴ and has achieved nearly half the targeted number in the East Midlands. In all other regions, tree planting is well below the targeted numbers.

Figure 3.9 To what extent do you think your project is on track to achieve its intended outcomes: Nature conservation and restoration?



Source: ICF survey of successful projects

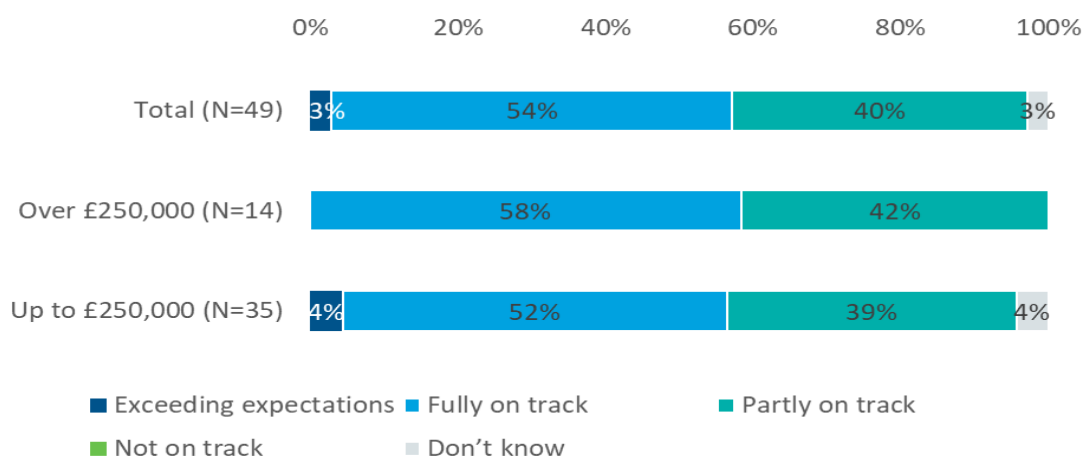
Table 3.10 To what extent do you think your project is on track to achieve its intended outcomes: Nature conservation and restoration?

Response categories	Total (N=49)	Large projects (N=14)	Medium projects (N=35)
Exceeding expectations	19%	21%	18%
Fully on track	63%	64%	62%
Partly on track	19%	14%	21%
Not on track	0%	0%	0%
Don't know	0%	0%	0%

Source: ICF survey of successful projects

²⁴ One project, which reported it has planted 50,000 trees to-date, accounts for nearly all trees planted in London.

Figure 3.10 To what extent do you think your project is on track to achieve its intended outcomes: Nature-based solutions, particularly for climate change mitigation and adaptation?



Source: ICF survey of successful projects

Figure 3.11 To what extent do you think your project is on track to achieve its intended outcomes: Nature-based solutions, particularly for climate change mitigation and adaptation?

Response categories	Total (N=49)	Large projects (N=14)	Medium projects (N=35)
Exceeding expectations	3%	0%	4%
Fully on track	54%	58%	52%
Partly on track	40%	42%	39%
Not on track	0%	0%	0%
Don't know	3%	0%	4%

Source: ICF survey of successful projects

Table 3.11 Total number of trees to be planted by GRCF projects by project size – progress compared to forecast

Project size	Forecast	Actual to-date	% of forecast
Large projects (£250,000 to £5,000,000)	690,600	70,490	10
Medium projects (£50,000 to £250,000)	107,924	34,705	32
Grand Total	798,524	105,564	13

Source: The Heritage Fund GRCF Round 1 grants database; GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

Table 3.12 Total number of trees to be planted by GRCF projects by region – progress compared to forecast

English region	Forecast	Actual to-date	% of forecast
East Midlands	16,000	7,450	47
East of England	112,000	745	1
London	6,000	51,216	854
North East	111,000	5,060	5
North West	167,000	26,010	16
South East	110,000	1,800	2
South West	108,000	18	0.02
West Midlands	117,000	288	0.2
Yorkshire and The Humber	55,000	12,608	23

Source: The Heritage Fund GRCF Round 1 grants database; GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

3.3.3 Delivery challenges

The most common challenges relating to the delivery of conservation and restoration and nature-based solution activities, raised through the successful application survey (open questions) and interviews were: land agreements and consents, seasonal windows for activities being missed, relationship challenges with key stakeholders, availability of staff and contractors and accessing materials.

The most commonly received comments on challenges related to **problems securing landowner agreements and receiving consents for works**. Even in cases where projects had agreements in principle from landowners and/or had established relationship with them, it took time to conclude the legal agreements (over six months in one case). The issue was accentuated in projects that had to negotiate with large numbers of landholders, by some reluctance of landowners to sign up to future activities particularly in the context of COVID-19 pandemic, and in cases where in principle agreements had been negotiated in haste to meeting GRCF application deadlines and hence landowners may not have thought through the consequences of participation. Some projects managed to find alternative solutions – such as finding alternative, more willing landowners. Some projects also faced challenges obtaining the necessary consents for works – it was suggested that this was due to backlogs in consenting teams and that the project needed to be up and running before consents could be progressed.

“Challenges with getting all the consents in place upfront for a project which is delivering many small interventions across a catchment and multiple landholdings.” (Survey respondent)

“Securing landownership agreements. Agreements in principle were in place prior to bid submission, but it has proven time consuming to secure the signature.” (Survey respondent)

Several projects commented that they had missed seasonal windows for undertaking environmental activities – such as tree and other planting activities and various habitat management actions – which meant they had not yet progressed as far as intended. In nearly all cases, the reasons cited for this were delays in project start times or delays in obtaining landowner agreements and

consents. The timing of the GRCF meant that projects with activities such as tree planting, which are seasonally-dependent, were particularly sensitive to delays and challenges at the outset.

“A lot of the work is seasonal, consequently the window for a lot of work is very narrow. Tree planting will only take place December 2021 through February 2022.” (Survey respondent)

“Though we were able to start, we were two months behind schedule at the outset, e.g.: in appointing staff. We missed the best part of the spring season and have made up some ground, but it would be helpful if the end date of March 2022 could be extended for 6 months.” (Survey respondent)

In some cases, projects cited that **COVID-19 lockdown restrictions limited their progress** – particularly in relation to the use of volunteers to undertake environmental actions. Whilst the survey identified COVID-19 restrictions as the most common cause of projects being off-course (75% of respondents – Figure 3.5), only a few comments linked this to conservation and restoration and nature-based solution activities.

Whilst some projects indicated that they had managed to catchup, or expected to catchup, on the delays, others suggested that it would be helpful if there could be flexibility over the project end date to give them time to conclude their planned activities. Another suggested that it would be helpful if they could substitute activities that were proving too challenging with others but indicated that they did not know if this was permitted.

Problems with contractors and materials were identified by 38% and 33% of project survey respondents respectively as reasons why they were not on course for their intended outcomes (Figure 3.5). Large projects were more likely than medium projects to identify problems with contractors and materials (38% and 33% respectively of large projects compared to 29% and 23% of medium projects). Project interview and open survey questions indicated that materials - such as wildflower seed, stock fencing and general building materials – were hard to procure due to general shortages. Contractors were reported to be often too busy to deliver works at the required time, with one contractor explaining that because of previous contracting work being delayed due to COVID-19 restrictions they now had too much work already. Such challenges securing contractors were particularly acute where particular specialists were required.

“Engaging appropriate contractors to undertake capital works has been a challenge. It was difficult obtaining quotes from the building sector and this took up a great deal of time.” (Survey respondent)

“Due to a shortage of materials (wood, metal stock fencing etc) on a national/global scale, contractors have not been able to commit to & commence on works when we wanted.” (Survey respondent)

3.4 Engaging people in nature

Overall view

Nearly 23,000 people are estimated to have been engaged by GRCF projects to-date through in-person activities. Nearly half of the activities delivered have targeted underrepresented or other priority groups. A further 3 million people are estimated to have been engaged through mass online events.

The majority of projects indicated that they are either exceeding expectations (20%) or fully on track (45%) to meet their intended outcomes. However projects have had challenges in delivering their engaging people in nature activities, primarily due to social distancing restrictions resulting from COVID-19. These have resulted in many events being smaller than planned, although sizes have now increased again, or being delayed so that a majority of the activities are now planned for the second half of the GRCF programme period. To mitigate the impacts of social distancing restrictions, some projects successfully shifted activities online, which helped to reach greater numbers of people than originally anticipated.

3.4.1 Progress to date

3.4.1.1 Scale of engagement

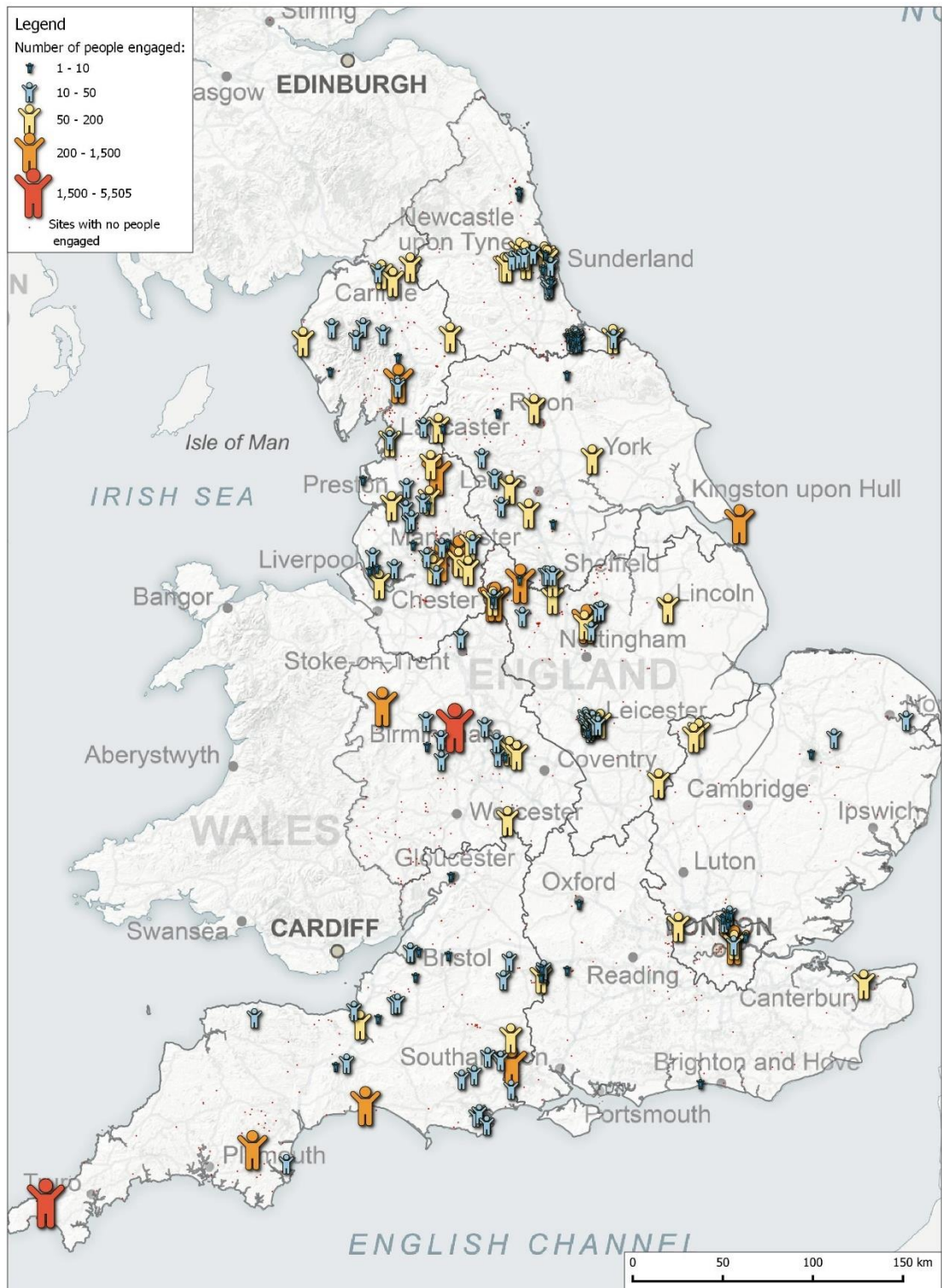
Nearly 23,000 people are estimated to have been engaged by GRCF projects to-date through in-person activities²⁵. The most common types of engagement activities were workshops and talks (including online), followed by educational sessions, active sessions (e.g. guided walks), participating in survey work, and other general engagement events²⁶. An average (mean) of 12 people were engaged in each event. Two thirds of the engagement events and people engaged were delivered by medium-size projects (70% and 66% respectively). **A further 3 million people are estimated to have been engaged through mass online events and media** (such as live wildlife camera streaming, online videos, newsletters, social media and websites).

Engagement activities have taken place throughout England (Figure 3.12 – includes online engagement). The highest numbers of people engaged so far through in-person activities (i.e. not including online engagement) are in the West Midlands (7,300 people), South West (4,223) and North West (3,809). These are also the regions which have seen the highest proportions of households engaged (Figure 3.13).

²⁵ Source: GRCF Round 1 interim monitoring data

²⁶ Source: ICF coding of activity descriptions provided in GRCF Round 1 interim monitoring data

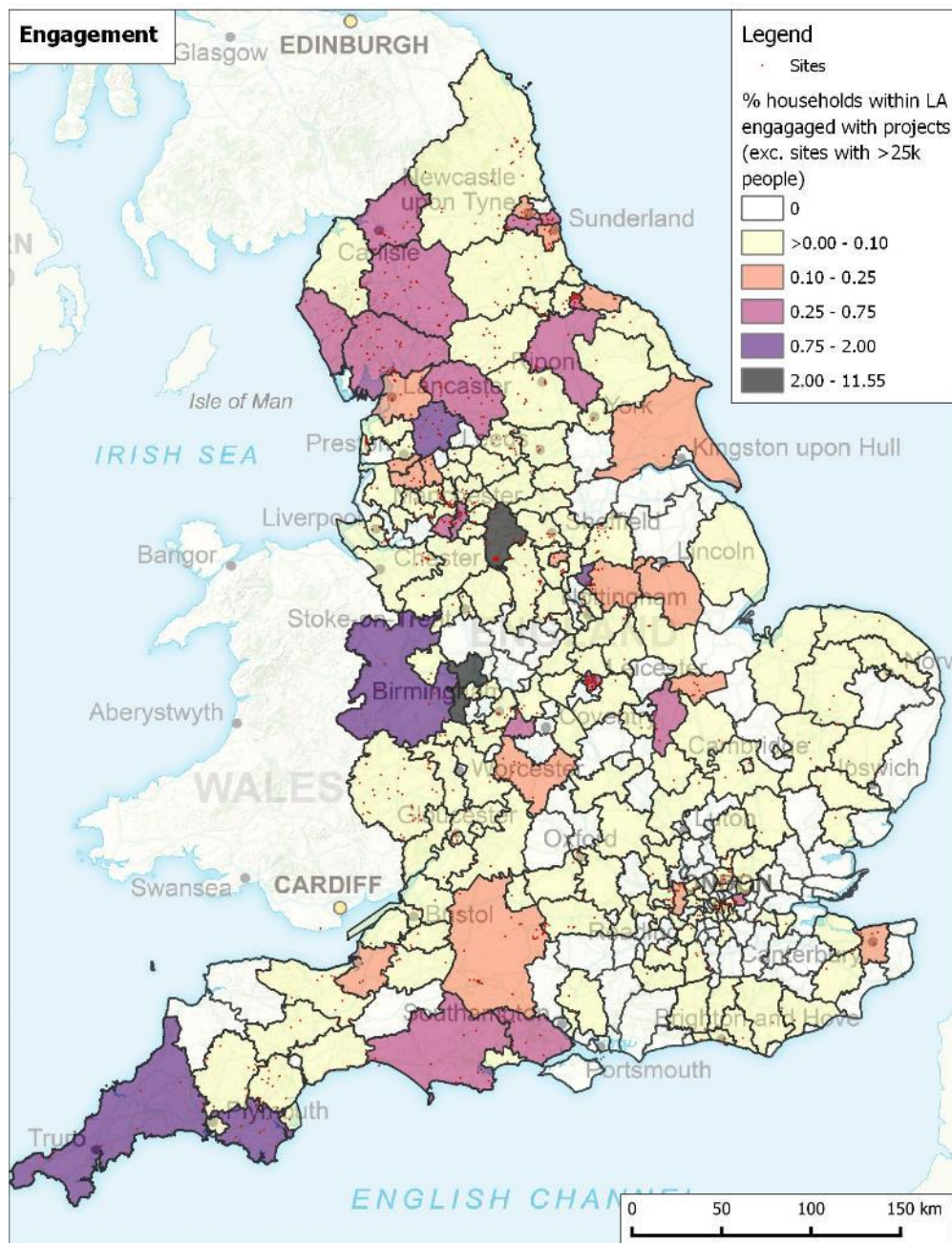
Figure 3.12 Approximate number of people engaged (excluding mass online activities) by project site location



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Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

Figure 3.13 Proportion of Local Authority households with at least one person engaged through project activities (excluding online events)



Source: www.openstreetmap.org/copyright Designated site boundaries download from the Natural England website © Natural England.

Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

3.4.1.2 Targeted engagement

Projects have so far reported undertaking 181 engagement activities targeting underrepresented or other priority groups, representing nearly a half of all engagement activities. Of the 123 projects for which details were provided, nearly three quarters of these activities (74%) were targeted at schools/children of school age and nearly a half (47%) at people from Black, Asian or another ethnic minority groups.

Projects reported delivering 14 social prescribing activities – where participants in the activity are referred to participate by a healthcare professional.

Table 3.13 Engagement activities targeted at people from underrepresented or other priority groups

Target group	Number of targeted engagement activities	% of targeted engagement activities*
Disabled people	3	2
People with mental health challenges	8	7
Aged 60 years or over	1	1
Aged 25 years or under	8	7
Schools/school-age children	91	74
Black, Asian or another ethnic minority	58	47
Social-economically disadvantaged	21	17

* Total sums to >100% as some activities targeted more than one target group or a group with more than one of the listed characteristics.

Source: ICF coding analysis of activity descriptions from GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

3.4.1.3 Infrastructure improvements

The most common infrastructure improvement activity to-date relates to **footpaths** (19 improvements, 26% of all improvement activity), followed by signage or interpretation and then fencing. Infrastructure improvements were delivered across all English regions, but were particularly concentrated in the North East and North West (which accounted for 54% of all infrastructure improvement activity).

Table 3.14 Number of infrastructure improvement activities by type

Infrastructure improvement	Number of activities
Footpaths	19
Signage or interpretation	17
Fences	16
Other	8
Accessibility changes (e.g. vehicle accessibility, ramps or rails)	3
Amenities (e.g. transport infrastructure, toilets, catering)	3
Board walks	3
Shelter or hide	2
Bridge(s)	1

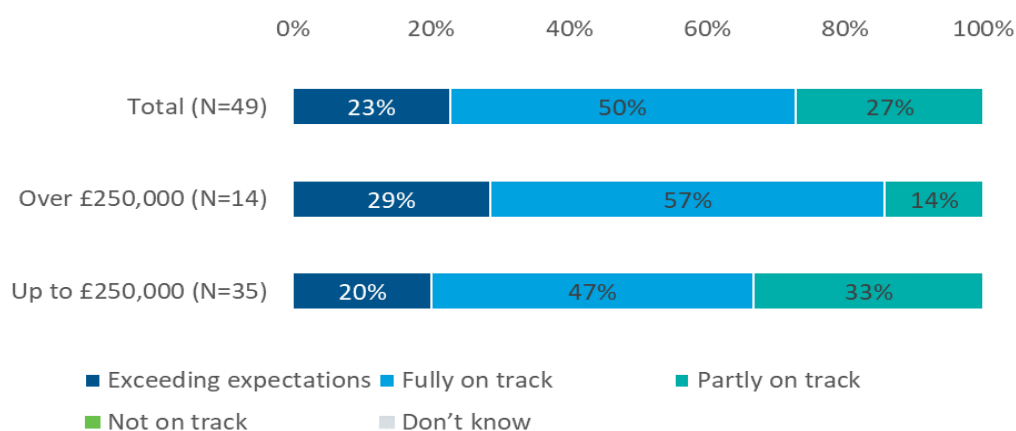
Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

3.4.2 Progress compared to projections

The majority of projects indicated that they are either **exceeding expectations (23%)** or **fully on track (50%)** to meet their intended outcomes (Figure 3.14, Table 3.15). Medium-size projects were more likely to indicate that they were only partially on track. No projects reported that they are 'not on track'. Outcome estimates were

not made in project applications for any of the engaging people in nature monitoring indicators²⁷.

Figure 3.14 To what extent do you think your project is on track to achieve its intended outcomes: Engaging people with nature?



Source: ICF survey of successful projects

Table 3.15 To what extent do you think your project is on track to achieve its intended outcomes: Engaging people with nature?

Response categories	Total (N=49)	Large projects (N=14)	Medium projects (N=35)
Exceeding expectations	23%	29%	20%
Fully on track	50%	57%	47%
Partly on track	27%	14%	33%
Not on track	0%	0%	0%
Don't know	0%	0%	0%

Source: ICF survey of successful projects

3.4.3 Delivery challenges

COVID-19 restrictions were the most frequently reported reason for projects not being on track to deliver their intended outcomes (Figure 3.5). Nearly all challenges raised in open survey questions and by interviewees referred to COVID-19 restrictions. COVID-19 restrictions were reported to have impacted on the delivery of engagement activities in terms of the number of people engaged, the number, type and variety of activities offered, and when they activities could be held. One project explained that at the time of GRCF Round 1 applications previous COVID-19 restrictions had eased, and they had built their plans around a continuation of the status quo. So when new restrictions were introduced in winter 2021 this impacted their ability to deliver their plans. Only a few projects indicated that they had managed to catch-up with their expectations on how many people they would be able to engage.

²⁷ Applicants provided estimates of expected site visitors numbers in their applications. It is expected that (at least some) projects will provide data on site visitor numbers in their final evaluations.

The scale of events was often smaller than originally planned. Some projects stated that the scale of activities had to be reduced (e.g. to accommodate the 'Rule of 6' restriction), and that the number of permitted participants has since been increased again. Others stated that the level of interest in participating was affected or found that a high number of participants cancelled. Some events were cancelled when individuals within a group – typically school groups – had tested positive for COVID-19.

Some projects had to delay engagement activities, hence had not managed to engage as many people as they had hoped so far. This has resulted in more engagement activities being pushed to later in project programmes. Some indicated that they would prefer to be able to conduct multiple rounds of engagement with the same individuals, which they feel would generate a more lasting impact, but are unable to do so in the time available.

Some projects had changed their intended approach, **shifting some activities to an online format** so that they could continue. In some cases this had led to them engaging more people than they would have been able to if activities had been conducted in person.

Two projects reporting that they might exceed expectations explained that this was because of the success of links with the local authority, who had facilitated them getting better access to prospective participants – including by facilitating engagement with GPs which may result in an increase in social prescribing referrals.

3.5 Employment and NGO resilience

Overall view

GRCF funding has, up to July 2021, directly supported a total of (at least) 459 positions, equivalent to 353 Full Time Equivalents (FTEs) and inclusive of 32 apprenticeships. Over three quarters of projects consider themselves to be exceeding expectations or fully on track to meet jobs and resilience goals and have been able to recruit staff with the right skills.

The picture on employment benefits compared to expectations is not yet clear. For large projects, where employment projections were available, the number of roles created for GRCF projects in lead and partner organisations is close to matching projected levels (125 FTEs reported vs 138 projected). Across other types of employment for large projects, including apprenticeships, reported levels are well below projections. Existing roles protected from redundancy in lead and partner organisations has so far covered only 16 FTEs compared to a projection of 73. Other employment types are expected to have been underreported.

Some projects experienced delays in getting recruitment processes started and some faced challenges with application rates. Hence the total level of employment supported by GRCF funding may increase over the remainder of the programme period. Recruiting suitable senior and specialist staff as well as previously unemployed staff were flagged by some projects as particularly difficult.

3.5.1 Progress to-date

Note on employment monitoring data: data in the July monitoring return provides only a partial picture of employment effects to date. The monitoring data includes data on only some types of roles, collected from 65 of the 69 funded projects. Data

on some types of employment has not yet been collected and some may have been underreported. No data on jobs supported through GRCF project spending with contractors and suppliers was reported (see **Error! Reference source not found.** for further details).

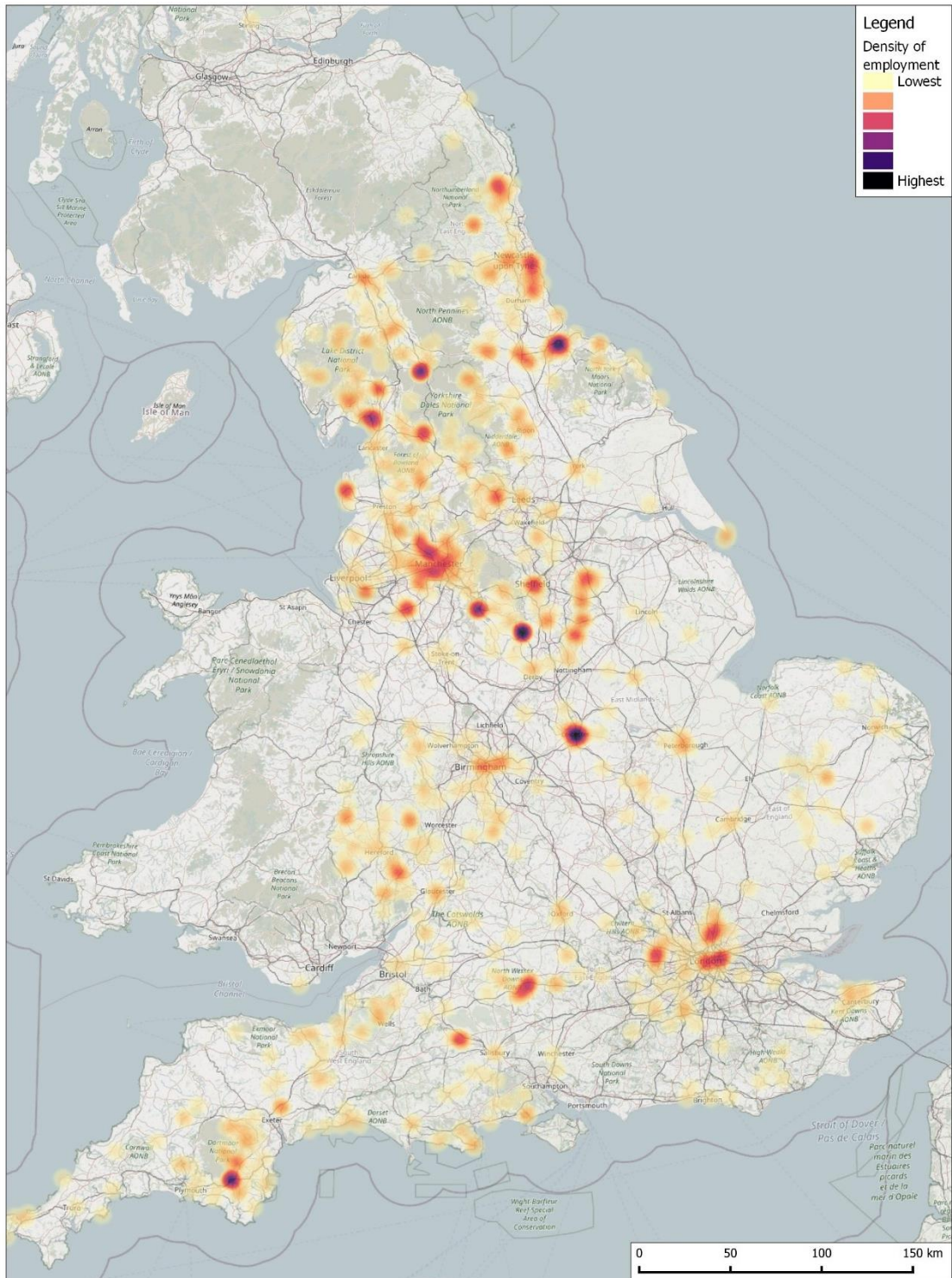
3.5.1.1 Employment

GRCF funding has to-date directly supported a reported total of (at least) 459 positions, supporting 353 Full Time Equivalents (FTEs)²⁸ in eNGOs and their project partner organisations. GRCF funding support for employment is temporary – posts will only be supported for the duration of the funding period. This includes 32 apprenticeship positions. The GRCF has helped to fund new posts, as well as to sustain existing positions in supported organisations. Whether these jobs can continue to be sustained after the GRCF funding period will depend on the ongoing financial sustainability of the supported organisations and their relevant activities.

Large projects account for the majority of the employment reported: 297 positions and 222 FTEs (65% and 63% of the total respectively). Medium projects account for 162 positions and 131 FTEs (see Figure 3.17). Employment has been supported across all regions of England (see Figure 3.15, Figure 3.16, Table 3.16, Table 3.17). The highest concentrations of GRCF-supported employment are in the North West and South West (accounting for 35% of all FTEs and 32% of all positions between them).

²⁸ Based on all available monitoring data.

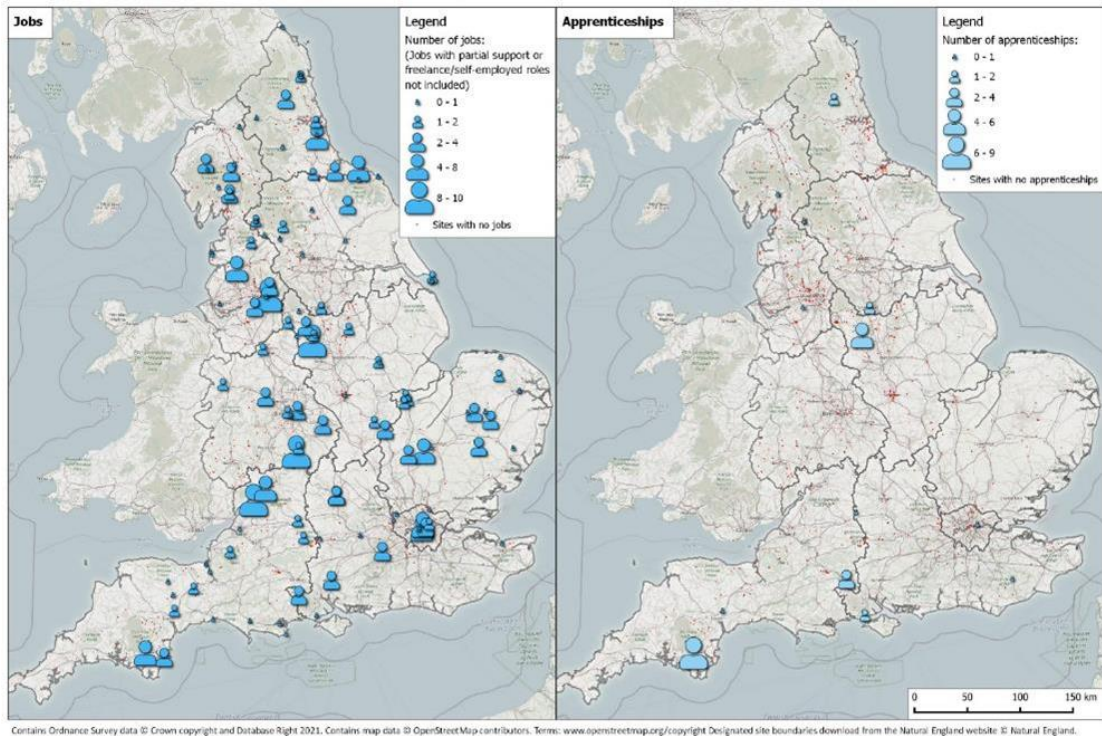
Figure 3.15 Density map of the geographic distribution of employment, (including apprenticeships) directly supported by GRCF funding by July 2021



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Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

Figure 3.16 Number of jobs (including apprenticeships) directly supported to-date by GRCF funding, at individual project sites



Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

Table 3.16 FTE jobs (including apprenticeships) directly supported to-date by GRCF Round 1, by region

Region	Number of FTEs	% of total
East Midlands	40	11
East of England	34	10
London	32	9
North East	35	10
North West	70	20
South East	29	8
South West	54	15
West Midlands	34	10
Yorkshire and The Humber	25	7
Unknown	0.1	0
Grand Total	353	100

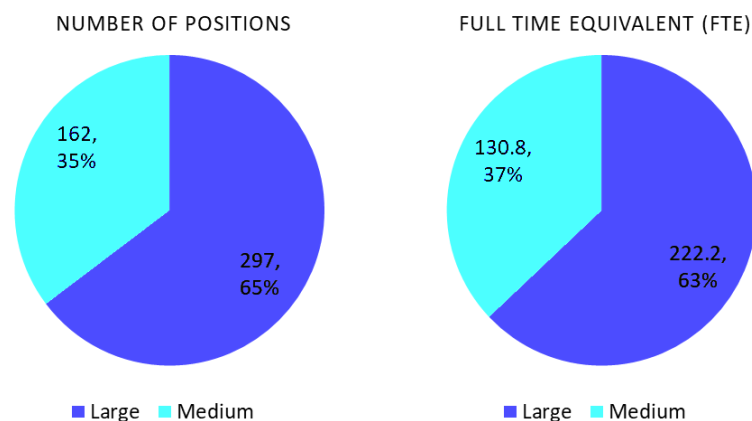
Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

Table 3.17 Employment positions (including apprenticeships) directly supported to-date by GRCF Round 1, by region

Region	Number of positions	% of total
East Midlands	53	12
East of England	44	10
London	41	9
North East	44	10
North West	71	15
South East	35	8
South West	80	17
West Midlands	57	12
Yorkshire and The Humber	33	7
Unknown	1	0
Grand Total	459	100

Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

Figure 3.17 Number of positions and FTE jobs (including apprenticeships) directly supported by GRCF Round 1, by project size



Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

Figure 3.18 Number of positions and FTE jobs (including apprenticeships) directly supported by GRCF Round 1, by project size

Employment variables	Large projects	Medium projects
Number of positions	297	162
% of total positions	65%	35%
Number of FTEs	222	131
% of total FTEs	63%	37%

Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

Nearly two thirds of the reported positions (291 positions, 63% of total) supported to date by the GRCF are new positions created for the GRCF

projects (see Table 3.18 to Table 3.21)²⁹. A further 94 (20%) are positions that received partial support through full cost recovery and 72 (16%) are existing roles protected from redundancy. These employment effects are similar in terms of FTE: 72% are new positions, 16% received partial support through full cost recovery and 12% are protected from redundancy. A greater proportion of medium size project employment benefits were through protecting existing roles from redundancy (20% of medium size project positions and FTEs) than was the case for large projects (13% of positions and 7% of FTEs).

A majority of employment (positions and FTEs) reported to date has been provided at lead organisations (Table 3.22).

Of the 32 apprenticeship positions reported, 31 were new positions created for the GRCF projects, 30 were associated with large projects, and 16 were provided at lead organisations and 14 at partner organisations.

Table 3.18 Number of employment positions (including apprenticeships) directly supported to-date by GRCF funding

GRCF support	Large projects	Medium projects	Total
Existing role protected from redundancy	39	33	72
Partial support - full cost recovery ³⁰	79	15	94
Role created for GRCF	179	112	291
Unknown	0	2	2
Grand Total	297	162	459

Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

Table 3.19 Percentage of employment positions (including apprenticeships) directly supported to-date by GRCF funding

GRCF support	Large projects	Medium projects	Total
Existing role protected from redundancy	13	20	16
Partial support - full cost recovery	27	9	20
Role created for GRCF	60	69	63
Unknown	0	1	0
Grand Total	100	100	100

Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

²⁹ Tables providing a breakdown of total jobs that are apprenticeships is provided in Annex X

³⁰ Expected to be an underestimate as whilst projects were able to submit 'partial support – full cost recovery' roles data, they were not specifically requested to do so as part of their first data return in July 2021.

Table 3.20 Number of Full Time Equivalents (FTEs) (including apprenticeships) directly supported by GRCF funding

GRCF support	Large projects	Medium projects	Total
Existing role protected from redundancy	16	26	43
Partial support - full cost recovery ³¹	49	7	56
Role created for GRCF	157	97	254
Unknown		1	1
Grand Total	222	131	353

Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

Table 3.21 Percentage of Full Time Equivalents (FTEs) (including apprenticeships) directly supported by GRCF funding

GRCF support	Large projects	Medium projects	Total
Existing role protected from redundancy	7	20	12
Partial support - full cost recovery	22	5	16
Role created for GRCF	71	75	72
Unknown	0	0	0
Grand Total	100	100	100

Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

Table 3.22 Employment positions and Full Time Equivalents (FTEs) (including apprenticeships) directly supported to-date by GRCF funding

Employer	Number of FTEs	% of total FTEs	Number of positions	% of total jobs
Lead applicant	207	59	264	58
Partner	128	36	170	37
Freelance/Self-employed	14	4	21	5
Other	3	1	2	0
(blank)	1	0	2	0
Grand Total	353	100	459	100

Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

Of the positions for which data was available (178, 39% of the total), nearly half of the employed individuals did not belong to any of the protected characteristics groups on which information was sought (see Table 3.23). **The most represented protected characteristics group was those aged 25 years and under (39% of**

³¹ Expected to be an underestimate as whilst projects were able to submit 'partial support – full cost recovery' roles data, they were not specifically requested to do so as part of their first data return in July 2021.

individuals). Individuals from other groups represented between 2 and 7% of the total.

Table 3.23 Employment positions (including apprenticeships) directly supported, by protected characteristics status of post holder

Equality group	Number of positions	% of total*
A disability	3	2
Aged 25 years or under	69	39
Aged 60 years or over	13	7
Black, Asian or another ethnic minority	5	3
LGBT+	6	3
Social-economically disadvantaged	12	7
Other	1	1
None of the above	88	49
Total positions for which data was available	178	100

* sums to >100% as individuals in some positions may belong to more than one group.

Source: GRCF Round 1 July 2021 monitoring return

3.5.1.2 eNGO resilience

Several interviewees and successful survey respondents provided comments indicating that the GRCF had supported the resilience of their organisation.

“Enabled job security for our organisation”. (Successful applicant)

“Without the funding during the pandemic our environmental Education Centre would have closed and may not have been able to restart so loss of a very valuable organisation for people and the environment.” (Successful applicant)

“Retaining and creating employment has allowed the retention and development of skills and knowledge which could only be achieved with the funding to support the project.” (Successful applicant)

“The difference the funding has made for organisations like ours as a result is huge. It has created new jobs, supported young people and moved the governance of the organisation on to ensure it is sustainable in the future and put us into a position to apply for future NLHF grants.” (Successful applicant)

“This funding not only enabled us to retain existing employees positions during a period where their roles may have otherwise been at risk due to the pandemic but also enabled us to provide additional employment, training and apprenticeships.” (Successful applicant)

Several projects also reported positive impacts on longer-term resilience as ‘unexpected benefits’ (see Section 3.6).

3.5.2 Progress compared to projections

The majority of projects indicated that their project is exceeding expectations (22%) or fully on track (61%) to meet their intended outcomes on jobs, skills and

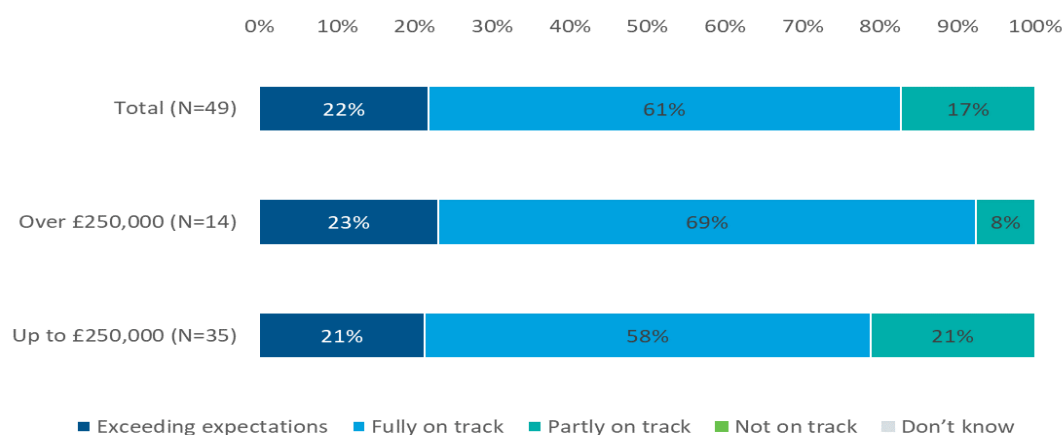
resilience (Figure 3.19). A minority (17%) indicated that their project is only ‘partly on track’. None reported that they are ‘not on track’. The large projects were slightly more likely than the medium projects to indicate that their project is ‘fully on track’ to achieving its outcomes in terms of jobs, skills and resilience.

When compared to estimated projections of employment benefits provided in project applications – available for large projects only (Table 3.25) – the available data indicates a mixed performance. The number of roles created for GRCF projects in lead and partner organisations is close to matching projected levels (125 FTEs reported vs 138 projected). Across other types of employment for large projects, including apprenticeships, reported levels are well below projections. Existing roles protected from redundancy in lead and partner organisations has so far covered only 16 FTEs compared to a target of 73 (22%). Other employment types are expected to have been underreported as they were not prioritised for the first data return in July 2021 in guidance issued by The Heritage Fund.

It is not clear whether the low level of employment reported to date, compared to projections, suggests some optimism bias in projects’ opinion on whether they are on track or not to deliver their jobs, skills and resilience outcomes; whether it indicates that large projects had challenges in accurately estimating likely employment at the application stage; or whether it is simply an artifact of underreporting at this interim monitoring stage.

For apprenticeships specifically, the number of roles reported to date is well below predicted levels. There could be a number of factors influencing this including delays in recruitment or reporting, or an overestimation of predicted figures.

Figure 3.19 To what extent do you think your project is on track to achieve its intended outcomes: Jobs, skills, and resilience?



Source: ICF survey of successful projects

Table 3.24 To what extent do you think your project is on track to achieve its intended outcomes: Jobs, skills, and resilience?

Response categories	Total (N=49)	Large projects (N=14)	Medium projects (N=35)
Exceeding expectations	22%	23%	21%
Fully on track	61%	69%	58%
Partly on track	17%	8%	21%
Not on track	0%	0%	0%
Don't know	0%	0%	0%

Source: ICF survey of successful projects

Table 3.25 Employment (FTE) to-date compared to projections at application (large projects only)

Employer	Employment type	Reported to date**	Projection at application	% of projection
Lead applicant	Role created for GRCF	70	96	73
Lead applicant	Existing role protected from redundancy	8	26	32
Lead applicant	Partial support - full cost recovery*	16	112	14
Lead applicant	Apprenticeships	14	230	6
Partner	Role created for GRCF	55	42	131
Partner	Existing role protected from redundancy	8	47	17
Partner	Partial support - full cost recovery*	32	147	22
Partner	Apprenticeships	15	441	3
Freelance/self employed	Role created for GRCF	1	154	1
Freelance/self employed	Existing role protected from redundancy	0	4	0
Other / not stated	Role created for GRCF	2	0	n/a
Total	Total	222	1298	17

* Expected to have been underreported, based on advice from The Heritage Fund on what projects were encouraged to prioritise for interim monitoring returns

** Based on data for 19 out of the 22 large projects. Data do not sum to total due to rounding.

Source: The Heritage Fund GRCF Round 1 grants database (projections at application); GRCF Round 1, July 2021 monitoring return

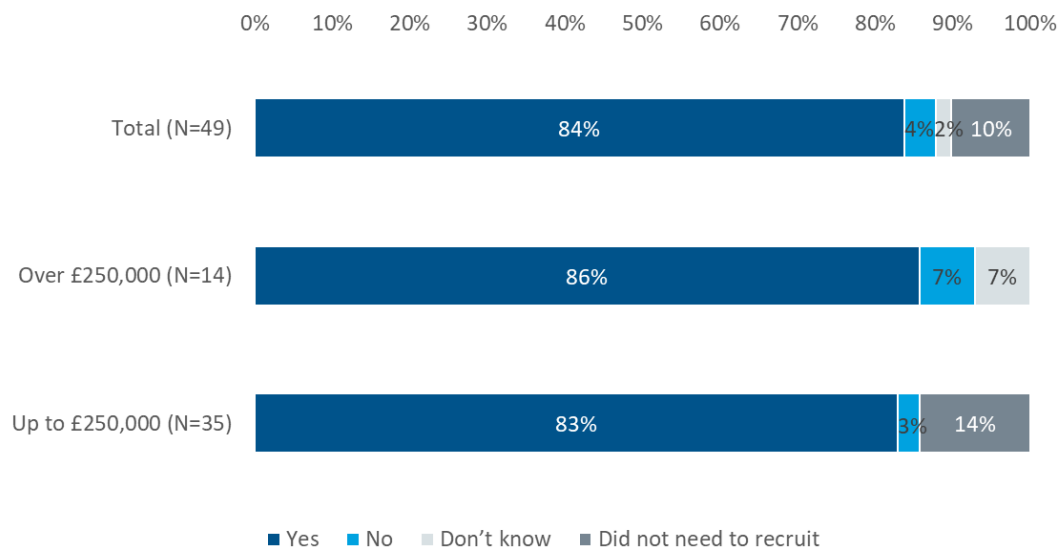
3.5.3 Delivery challenges

The majority of surveyed projects (84%) have managed to hire people with the right skills and expertise (Figure 3.20, Table 3.26). Several projects highlighted the dedication and skills of their project teams as key factors that have enabled them to be on track to meet one or more of their project outcomes. However, where projects experienced delays getting started this had knock-on effects for recruitment, delaying this process also. Many indicated that this had not had a lasting impact on their project, with some stating that they had been able catch-up both their recruitment plans and project activities.

During the interviews, several of the projects indicated that they have not had any problems with recruitment, and some were surprised how many good quality applications they had received. A few projects highlighted that uptake / quality of interns and apprentices had exceeded their expectations. An interviewee explained

that the interns they recruited are “committed” and “enthusiastic” and “all have exceeded our expectations”.

Figure 3.20 Has your project managed to hire people with the right skills and expertise?



Source: ICF survey of successful projects

Table 3.26 Has your project managed to hire people with the right skills and expertise?

Response categories	Total (N=49)	Large projects (N=14)	Medium projects (N=35)
Yes	84%	86%	83%
No	4%	7%	3%
Don't know	2%	7%	0%
Did not need to recruit	10%	0%	14%

Source: ICF survey of successful projects

However, several projects have found it challenging to recruit the staff that they wanted. In some cases this has impacted on delivery of their projects. Of the 24 projects that indicated they were either partially or not on track to meet one or more of their project outcomes³², 25% (6 projects) indicated problems hiring staff and 13% (3 projects) problems hiring apprentices.

Many survey respondents and interviewees noted that **delays experienced early on in projects and at start up stage pushed back a number of essential activities, including recruitment**, which was particularly difficult as it takes time to create the job post, advertise the post and recruit the correct staff. A number of grantees also mentioned that the Christmas period was a particularly difficult time to recruit new staff, and in some instances, the delayed start date pushed it back to this period.

³² Any of their conservation and restoration, nature-based solutions, engagement, or jobs, skills and resilience outcomes.

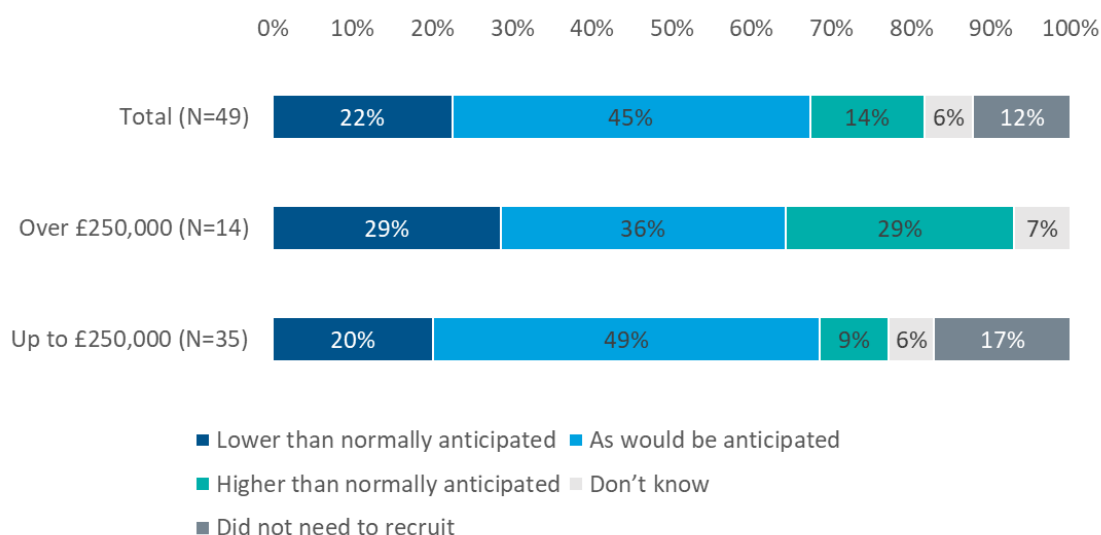
Most of the projects looking to recruit new staff indicated that **application rates had been as anticipated or higher** than anticipated. However a minority (22%) reported that they were lower than normally anticipated (Figure 3.21).

“We are not receiving enough applications/ trainees are not turning up to interviews, which is making it difficult to hit reach our target for 3,500 man hours worked by the trainees” (Successful applicant)

Specific recruitment issues raised focussed on the **difficulty of filling roles for senior or specialist staff**. Of those reporting challenges filling senior roles (e.g. project managers), issues included that the short-term nature of the posts made the jobs unattractive, that candidates’ notice periods were not compatible with project timeframes (they were not able to start at the time they were needed). To try to fill specialist roles one project used a specialist recruiter and published in trade magazines but still found it challenging to recruit a suitable candidate because the talent pool is small.

“The vast majority of jobs have recruited people with the right skills and experience, in particular the trainees and Project Officer positions. The posts at Manager level (new rather than continuation of existing) has been more challenging due to the short term nature of these posts.” (Successful applicant)

Figure 3.21 When recruiting for roles to deliver the project, what were the application rates for posts?



Source: ICF survey of successful projects

Table 3.27 When recruiting for roles to deliver the project, what were the application rates for posts?

Response categories	Total (N=49)	Large projects (N=14)	Medium projects (N=35)
Lower than normally anticipated	22%	29%	20%
As would be anticipated	45%	36%	49%
Higher than normally anticipated	14%	29%	9%
Don't know	6%	7%	6%
Did not need to recruit	12%	0%	17%

Source: ICF survey of successful projects

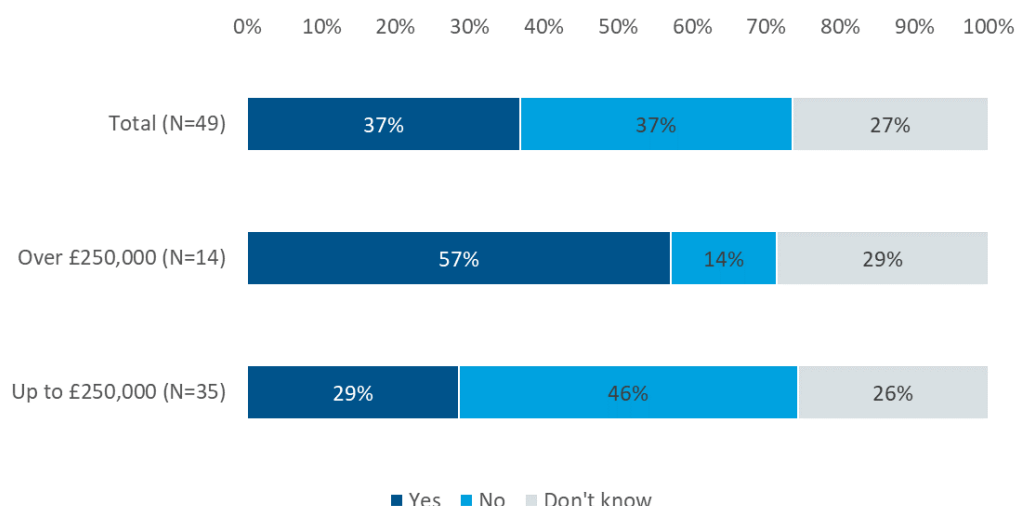
Several projects reported³³ that they have struggled to recruit people who are unemployed. Several projects mentioned challenges with using the Kickstart Scheme. This included a project using the Kickstart gateway³⁴, which was slow and meant they could not talk directly to the applicants. Another project commented that because of the difficulties they have experienced recruiting young people to Kickstart Scheme roles they are now considering alternative approaches. One project failed in an application for Kickstart Scheme funding so has had to reallocate project funding to recruit interns. Another project explained that they have not received the expected number of applications or referrals from the job centres – they explained that the impetus is on the young people to apply and that there is no downward pressure from the job centres to do it. The project explained that because they do not have direct contact with the young people in question, they are not able to encourage them to apply.

3.6 Unexpected benefits

Over a third of projects, particularly large projects, indicated that their project had delivered unexpected benefits (Figure 3.22, Table 3.28). Several projects stated that their partnerships had benefited and been strengthened. One project explained that they now had *“a better understanding of the strengths of each partner and how we can support each other to improve delivery/project outputs”*. Several projects described the catalytic effects of GRCF funding – it had helped projects to raise their profiles and to secure additional funding to expand or extend their GRCF project, and to build new partnerships e.g. with universities and local authorities. Two projects commented that they have adopted new ways of working that will adopt going forward.

“We have significantly improved our project management processes and expanded them across our organisation, embedding them in the way we do work. This will make us much more resilient in future.” (Successful applicant)

Figure 3.22 Has your project delivered any unexpected benefits?



³³ In the ICF survey of successful projects and ICF interviews with successful projects

³⁴ Kickstart gateways are organisations that help employers get funding to create jobs for 16 to 24 year olds on Universal Credit

Source: ICF survey of successful projects

Table 3.28 Has your project delivered any unexpected benefits?

Response categories	Total (N=49)	Large projects (N=14)	Medium projects (N=35)
Yes	37%	57%	29%
No	37%	14%	46%
Don't know	27%	29%	26%

Source: ICF survey of successful projects

4 Evaluation findings: impacts of the GRCF

4.1 The impact attributable to the GRCF

4.1.1 Introduction

An important consideration for assessing the impact and value for money of the GRCF is the definition of a counterfactual. The counterfactual represents the future state of any given indicator had the GRCF not been made available to projects. The counterfactual supports an assessment of the impacts that can be attributed to the intervention.

This section provides an initial view on the likely extent to which observed outputs and outcomes can be attributed to the GRCF. It examines attribution by directly asking funded projects whether they would have been able to progress their projects in the absence of GRCF funding; and if they could have progressed their project whether the outputs and outcomes would have been similar. In addition, it examines whether unsuccessful applicants have been able to progress their projects without GRCF funding.

A fuller analysis of the impact of the GRCF will be undertaken in the final evaluation in 2022.

4.1.1.1 Overall view

Evidence from surveys of both successful and unsuccessful applicants suggests that a large proportion of the outcomes expected to be achieved through GRCF funding would not be secured without it.

The majority of successful applicants expressed the view that their project would not have gone ahead in the absence of GRCF funding and that they would not have secured funding from alternative sources. A majority of respondents suggested that there would be negative impacts on their organisation and staffing without GRCF funding. In the few cases where projects may have gone ahead, outcomes would likely have been smaller and delivered slower.

Most unsuccessful applicants (that did not reapply for GRCF Round 2) are unlikely to take their projects forward with other funding: 45% of respondents indicated that their project was indefinitely delayed and 8% that they did not intend to progress it. In general, unsuccessful applicants who are managing to progress their project in the absence of GRCF funding indicate that their progress tends to be slower and their outcomes reduced.

4.1.2 Evidence from successful applicants

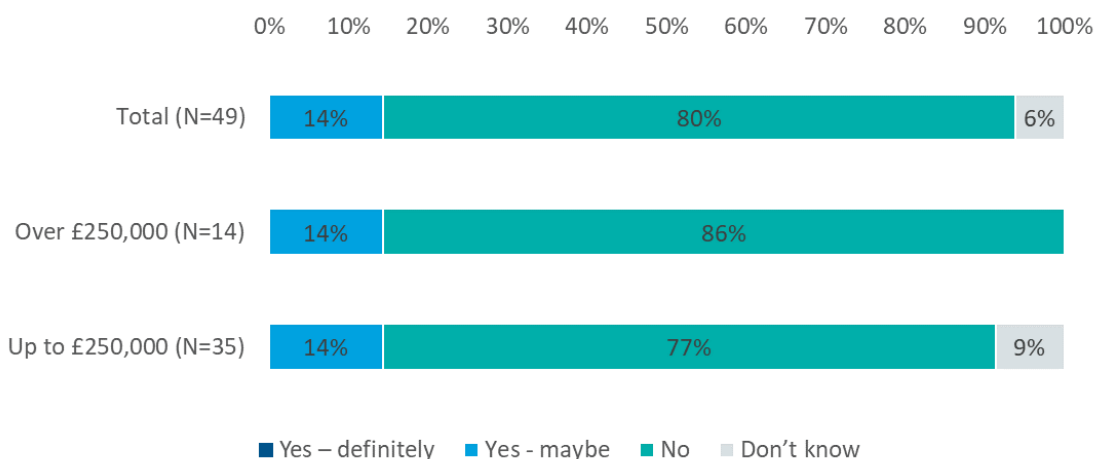
The online survey questioned successful applicants about issues relating to the counterfactual. Some caution is required in interpreting the responses, because of uncertainties regarding the likely outcomes in the absence of the GRCF.

Furthermore, the survey took place within a year of the projects gaining GRCF funding, and it is possible that, over a longer duration, the chance of similar outcomes being achieved without the GRCF may increase.

80% of successful applicants expressed the view that their project would not have gone ahead in the absence of GRCF funding, with no respondent

answering that their project would have definitely gone ahead without GRCF funding. The proportion stating that their project would not have gone ahead was higher for large projects (86%) than medium-sized ones (77%). These findings suggest a high degree of attribution (Figure 4.1, Table 4.1). In the few cases where projects may still have gone ahead in the absence of GRCF funding, respondents³⁵ indicated that it may have delivered reduced impacts against the GRCF themes, provide less benefit for jobs, skills and eNGO resilience, and to have taken longer to deliver.

Figure 4.1 Would your project have gone ahead in the absence of funding from the GRCF? (Successful applicants)



Source: ICF survey of successful applicants

Table 4.1 Would your project have gone ahead in the absence of funding from the GRCF? (Successful applicants)

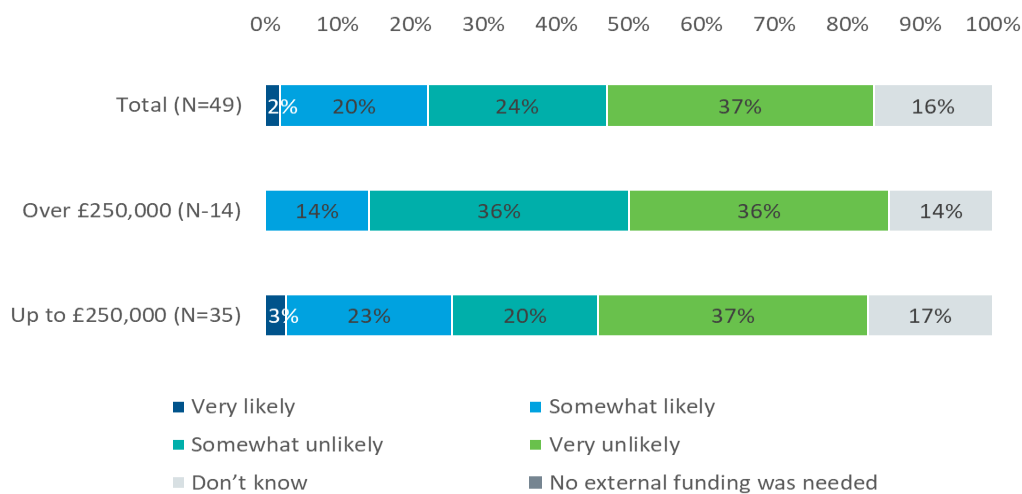
Response categories	Total (N=49)	Large projects (N=14)	Medium projects (N=35)
Yes – definitely	0%	0%	0%
Yes - maybe	14%	14%	14%
No	80%	86%	77%
Don't know	6%	0%	9%

Source: ICF survey of successful applicants

A majority of successful applicants did not think their project could have secured funding from other sources if not funded by the GRCF (Figure 4.2, Table 4.2), although views were mixed. Possible sources of alternative funding specified included fundraising from private sources (e.g. trusts, foundations, donations; 10 projects); grants from public sources (e.g. National Lottery, local authority, UK Government; 4 projects); earned income (2 projects) and own reserves (2 projects).

³⁵ Only seven respondents answered this question, presumably because most had indicated that their project would not have proceeded without GRCF funding.

Figure 4.2 Had you not received a grant from the GRCF, do you think it is likely that your project would have secured funding from an alternative source? (Successful applicants)



Source: ICF survey of successful applicants

Table 4.2 Had you not received a grant from the GRCF, do you think it is likely that your project would have secured funding from an alternative source? (Successful applicants)

Response categories	Total (N=49)	Large projects (N=14)	Medium projects (N=35)
Very likely	2%	0%	3%
Somewhat likely	20%	14%	23%
Somewhat unlikely	24%	36%	20%
Very unlikely	37%	36%	37%
Don't know	16%	14%	17%
No external funding was needed	0%	0%	0%

Source: ICF survey of successful applicants

A majority of respondents suggested that there would be negative impacts on their organisation and staffing without GRCF funding (Figure 4.3, Table 4.3), with:

- 63% suggesting that new recruitment may have ceased.
- 61% suggesting that opportunities for volunteers may have reduced.
- 53% indicating that opportunities for learning and development may have reduced.
- 47% suggesting that some staff may have been made redundant.
- 35% indicating that some staff may have been furloughed.
- Only 2% indicating that there would have been no change to their organisation or staffing.

Large projects tended to indicate greater effects on their organisation and staffing than medium-sized ones. This was true for each of the above effects, and suggests,

unsurprisingly, that larger grants had greater impacts on organisations and their staff. Open ended responses from individual projects are given below and lend support to the finding that the GRCF is delivering additional impacts.

“There would be no change for the lead organisation, but a loss of staff in partner organisations.” (Successful applicant)

“No trainees, community groups would not have received support.” (Successful applicant)

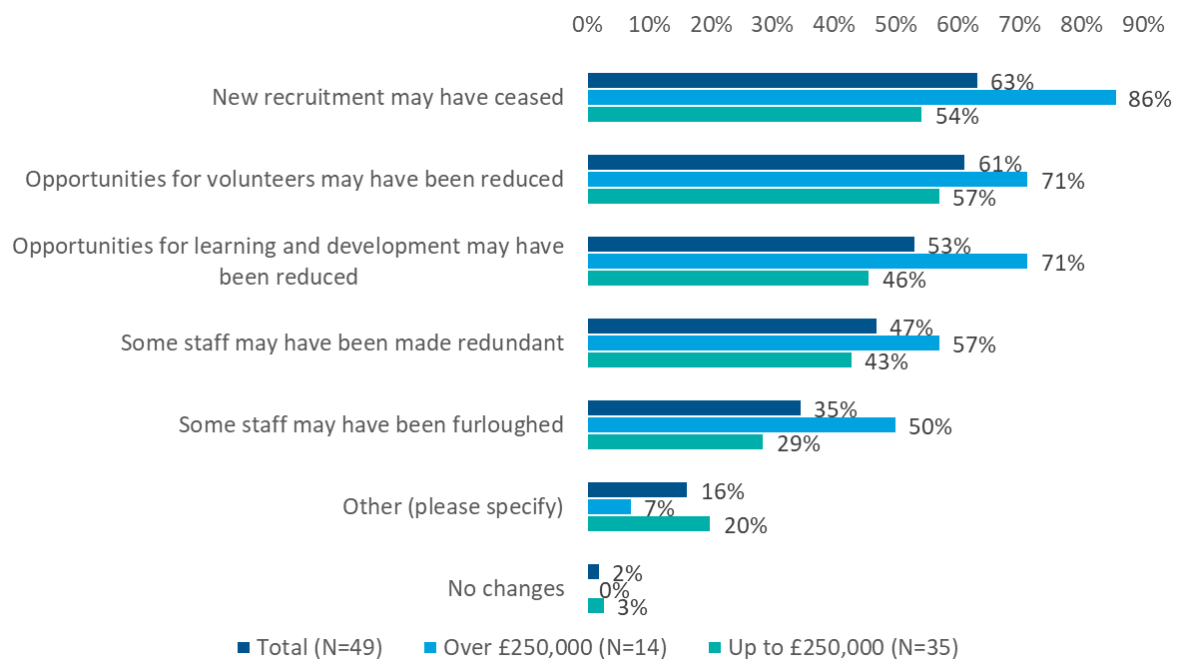
“We have received no benefit from the project but are supporting others where furlough / redundancy may have been an option.” (Successful applicant)

“New roles would not have been created.” (Successful applicant)

“Site infrastructure wouldn't have gone ahead, the scale of conservation work wouldn't have been achieved, the governance of the organisation wouldn't have been addressed and moved forwards to ensure sustainability and the additional plans/works wouldn't have happened.” (Successful applicant)

“The organisation might have had to be wound up.” (Successful applicant)

Figure 4.3 What would have happened to your organisation and staff in the absence of funding from the GRCF? (Successful applicants)



Source: ICF survey of successful applicants

Table 4.3 What would have happened to your organisation and staff in the absence of funding from the GRCF? (Successful applicants)

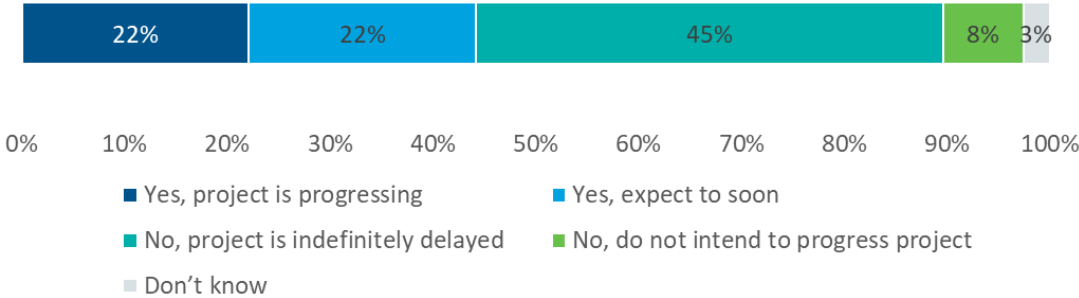
Response categories	Total (N=49)	Large projects (N=14)	Medium projects (N=35)
New recruitment may have ceased	63%	86%	54%
Opportunities for volunteers may have been reduced	61%	71%	57%
Opportunities for learning and development may have been reduced	53%	71%	46%
Some staff may have been made redundant	47%	57%	43%
Some staff may have been furloughed	35%	50%	29%
Other (please specify)	16%	7%	20%
No changes	2%	0%	3%

Source: ICF survey of successful applicants

4.1.3 Evidence from unsuccessful applicants

Unsuccessful projects are unlikely to be taken forward. In the survey of unsuccessful applicants³⁶ 45% of respondents indicated that their project was indefinitely delayed and 8% that they did not intend to progress it, while 22% of the indicated that their project was progressing and a further 22% expected it to progress soon, (Figure 4.4, Table 4.4).

Figure 4.4 Have you progressed your project in some way, in the absence of funding from the GRCF? (N=77) (Unsuccessful applicants)



Source: ICF survey of unsuccessful applicants

³⁶ Excluding those who reapplied for GRCF Round 2 funding

Table 4.4 Have you progressed your project in some way, in the absence of funding from the GRCF? (N=77) (Unsuccessful applicants)

Response categories	Have you progressed your project in some way, in the absence of funding from the GRCF? (N=77)
Yes, project is progressing	22%
Yes, expect to soon	22%
No, project is indefinitely delayed	45%
No, do not intend to progress project	8%
Don't know	3%

Source: ICF survey of unsuccessful applicants

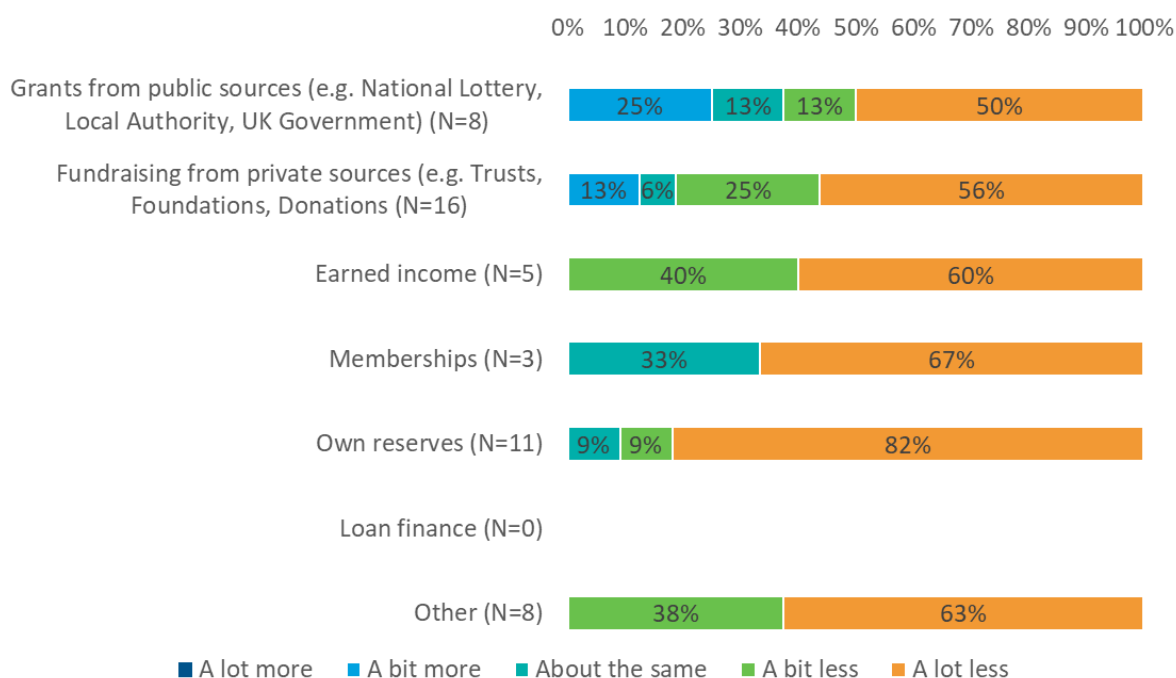
At the time of the survey, 52% of respondents had not received or applied for funding from an alternative source, while 45% had. The most common funding sources secured by unsuccessful applicants were private sources (trusts, foundations and donations), their own reserves and public grants (National Lottery, local authorities and UK government). (Table 4.5). The levels of funding secured from each of these sources was, for most projects, less than that applied for through GRCF (Figure 4.5, Table 4.6).

Table 4.5 Numbers of unsuccessful applicants applying for and securing funding from other sources (N=35)

Source type	Funding secured	Funding identified/ applied for	Funding not secured/ Decision awaited	Total
Grants from public sources (e.g. National Lottery, Local Authority, UK Government)	8	7	6	21
Fundraising from private sources (e.g. Trusts, Foundations, Donations)	16	3	5	24
Earned income	5	3	6	14
Memberships	3	0	6	9
Own reserves	11	1	1	13
Loan finance	0	0	6	6
Other	8	1	4	13

Source: ICF survey of successful applicants

Figure 4.5 Please indicate how the amount of funding secured compared to the amount of GRCF funding that you applied for (Unsuccessful applicants)



Source: ICF survey of unsuccessful applicants

Table 4.6 Please indicate how the amount of funding secured compared to the amount of GRCF funding that you applied for (Unsuccessful applicants)

Response category	Grants from public sources (e.g. National Lottery, Local Authority, UK Government) (N=8)	Fundraising from private sources (e.g. Trusts, Foundations, Donations) (N=16)	Earned income (N=5)	Memberships (N=3)	Own reserves (N=11)	Loan finance (N=0)	Other (N=8)
A lot more	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
A bit more	25%	13%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
About the same	13%	6%	0%	33%	9%	0%	0%
A bit less	13%	25%	40%	0%	9%	0%	38%
A lot less	50%	56%	60%	67%	82%	0%	63%

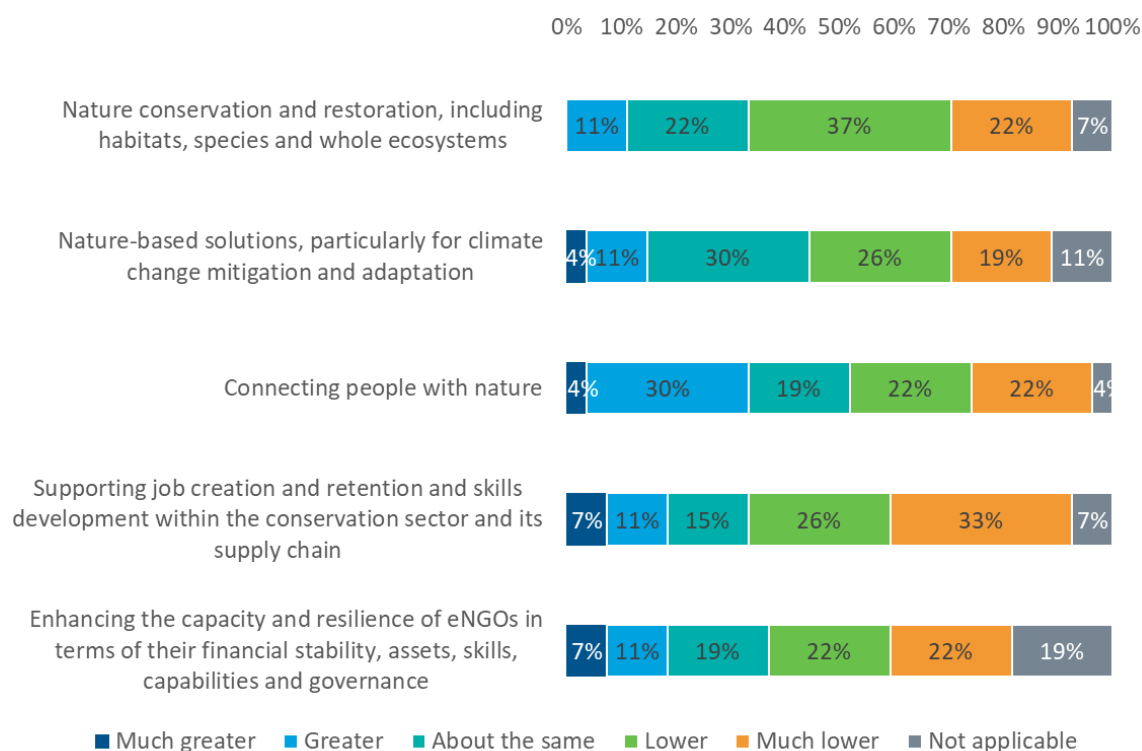
Source: ICF survey of unsuccessful applicants

In general, unsuccessful applicants who are managing to progress their project in the absence of GRCF funding indicate that their progress tends to be slower and their outcomes reduced compared to those expected if GRCF funding had been received. The strength of these effects varies for different outcome types, with jobs and skills and nature conservation and restoration

outcomes most reduced. The exception was for 'connecting people with nature outcomes, where the most common response was that outcomes would be greater, Of the 34 unsuccessful applicants that indicated that their projects were progressing in some way without GRCF funding, 79% indicated that their projects differed in some way from the GRCF application, while 18% stated that they were the same. The following differences were indicated (Figure 4.6, Table 4.7):

- Geographic area: 37% of projects were operating on a smaller geographic area, 4% on a larger area, and 52% on the same area, while 7% indicated that area was not applicable.
- Timescale: 74% indicated that their activities would be delivered over a longer timescale, 11% over a shorter timescale and 11% over the same timescale as they would if funded by GRCF.
- Nature conservation and restoration outcomes: 11% indicated that outcomes would be greater than under GRCF, 22% about the same, and 59% that they would be lower or much lower.
- Nature-based solutions outcomes: 15% indicated that outcomes would be greater or much greater than under GRCF, 30% about the same, and 45% that they would be lower or much lower.
- Connecting people with nature outcomes: 34% indicated that outcomes would be greater or much greater than under GRCF, 22% about the same, and 22% that they would be lower or much lower.
- Jobs and skills outcomes: 18% indicated that outcomes would be greater or much greater than under GRCF, 15% about the same, and 59% that they would be lower or much lower.
- eNGO capacity and resilience outcomes: 18% indicated that outcomes would be greater or much greater than under GRCF, 19% about the same, and 44% that they would be lower or much lower.

Figure 4.6 Please tell us how your project is different in relation to the outcomes you would have expected to deliver if your project had received GRCF funding? (N=27) (Unsuccessful applicants)



Source: ICF survey of unsuccessful applicants

Table 4.7 Please tell us how your project is different in relation to the outcomes you would have expected to deliver if your project had received GRCF funding? (N=27) (Unsuccessful applicants)

Response categories	Nature conservation and restoration, including habitats, species and whole ecosystems	Nature-based solutions, particularly for climate change mitigation and adaptation	Connecting people with nature	Supporting job creation and retention and skills development within the conservation sector and its supply chain	Enhancing the capacity and resilience of eNGOs in terms of their financial stability, assets, skills, capabilities and governance
Much greater	0%	4%	4%	7%	7%
Greater	11%	11%	30%	11%	11%
About the same	22%	30%	19%	15%	19%
Lower	37%	26%	22%	26%	22%
Much lower	22%	19%	22%	33%	22%

Response categories	Nature conservation and restoration, including habitats, species and whole ecosystems	Nature-based solutions, particularly for climate change mitigation and adaptation	Connecting people with nature	Supporting job creation and retention and skills development within the conservation sector and its supply chain	Enhancing the capacity and resilience of eNGOs in terms of their financial stability, assets, skills, capabilities and governance
Not applicable	7%	11%	4%	7%	19%

Source: ICF survey of unsuccessful applicants

4.2 Ensuring the longer-term legacy of projects

4.2.1 Introduction

This section considers the issue of the GRCF’s long-term legacy, the extent to which projects have plans to ensure it is fulfilled, and what risks there are to this.

The GRCF is a short-term funding scheme, providing grants lasting for a period of little more than one year. However many of the targeted outcomes of the funded projects will take far longer to materialise. This is particularly the case for the ecosystem restoration and nature-based solution themes. For example, enhanced habitat extent and condition, responses in species abundance, and improvements in ecosystem function and its contribution to services may take many years to fully materialise. Newly created habitats take time to develop, habitat condition may take years to improve following restoration works, species may respond over time to conservation actions, and trees and vegetation take time to grow, store carbon and absorb water. Similarly, people engagement outcomes may emerge slowly e.g. as visitor numbers to enhanced woodlands increase over time, or as people’s appreciation of and engagement with the natural world develops gradually.

Several GRCF stakeholders highlighted the risk of not achieving the long-term legacy of the GRCF, stating that the short-term nature of the funding did not match the longer-term time horizons necessary to achieve environmental outcomes. This was recognised as a necessary trade-off of balancing the emergency funding required for the short-term effects of the pandemic with more strategic environmental objectives. Hence all successful projects are required to produce long-term legacy plans.

4.2.1.1 Overall view

Funded projects are actively planning to ensure their long-term legacy is delivered, with a range of mechanisms being deployed. These include securing additional funding from public and private sources, as well as developing volunteer networks and empowering community groups, to enable the continuation of project activities and site management plans. By far the most common risk to the long-term legacy of projects risk identified by survey respondents was that of failing to secure additional funding. In particular the short-term employment benefits supported by GRCF –

helping to retain and create jobs and skills development – are at risk of being lost of funding to retain these posts is not secured.

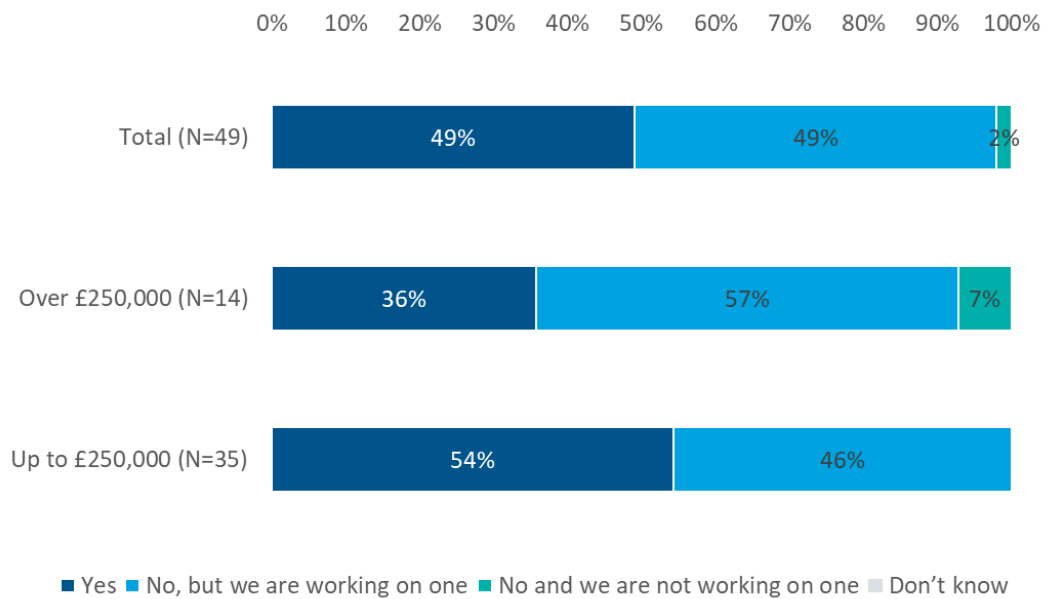
4.2.2 Project legacy planning

Funded projects are actively planning to ensure their long-term legacy is delivered (Figure 4.7, Table 4.8). Examples of legacy planning provided in interviews with projects highlighted the different routes being pursued, two of which (social enterprise and community empowerment) are models that are intended to self-perpetuate. The examples were:

- **Business as Usual operations:** The eNGO will continue to play an active role in monitoring the site and/or undertaking ongoing environmental/infrastructure management activities, subsumed as part of its business-as-usual operations.
- **Additional funding:** Securing future funding was identified by several projects as core to their legacy planning. There are examples of projects that had already secured funding to support continuation of the project, and projects that are already engaged with prospective funders and have a forward plan on funding needs and opportunities.
- **Contractual agreements:** agreements have been put in place obliging landowners to deliver the required management over the medium-to-long term (e.g. 10 years), which is an obligation attached to the provision of GRCF funding.
- **Volunteer networks:** including use of volunteers trained and engaged in implementing the GRCF funded actions, will provide ongoing activity to maintain site or deliver other actions.
- **Empowerment of groups:** Some projects are empowering volunteers and community groups to act as champions and to organise their own events and seek their own funding for future activities, to independently continue to deliver GRCF-themed action.
- **Social enterprise:** One project will establish a social enterprise to manage the site. A tree nursery within the site will provide saplings to support UK tree planting goals, the sale of which will fund the social enterprise enabling them to manage the whole site as well as offer training and employment opportunities for people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

In addition, some projects stated that they were seeking additional funding to support the activities required after GRCF funding ended, whilst others identified elements of their projects that they thought would not require any meaningful future funding or action (examples offered included a newly created habitat and public footpath).

Figure 4.7 Looking ahead, do you have a plan in place to ensure the long-term legacy of your project (to ensure the longer-term outcomes are achieved after the GRCF funding period has finished e.g. over the next 10+ years)?



Source: ICF successful applicant survey

Table 4.8 Looking ahead, do you have a plan in place to ensure the long-term legacy of your project (to ensure the longer-term outcomes are achieved after the GRCF funding period has finished e.g. over the next 10+ years)?

Response categories	Total (N=49)	Large projects (N=14)	Medium projects (N=35)
Yes	49%	36%	54%
No, but we are working on one	49%	57%	46%
No and we are not working on one	2%	7%	0%
Don't know	0%	0%	0%

Source: ICF successful applicant survey

4.2.3 Risk and threats to the long-term legacy of projects

By far the most commonly identified risk by survey respondents³⁷ to the long-term legacy of projects was that of failing to secure additional funding. Other risks included the need for ongoing relationship management, environmental actions not working as planned (and the influence on this of climate change over the longer term), and the effect of changes in markets or government policy.

³⁷ Success applicant survey, open comments

“We're dependent on receiving further funding through other funders, or from local authority commissioners. Whilst we have a plan, are already discussing this with supporting organisations, and are optimistic there is no guarantee that we will receive funding to continue with the work past March 2022.” (Successful applicant)

Without such funding many of the posts funded by GRCF, particularly newly created posts, may not be maintained and hence many of the skills and experiences gained lost to the organisations and sector. In some cases projects were positive about the likelihood of obtaining additional project funding – for example it was suggested that funding and support for peatland restoration is expected to increase over the medium term.

“We have recruited excellent new staff members, the challenge now is how we retain them post the project funded period.” (Successful applicant)

“Critical to securing long term legacy is securing funding to keep the project officer in post for longer than her GRCF contracted period. She is the only paid member of staff in the organisation. Funding applications and alternative funding sources are currently being explored.” (Successful applicant)

“We recruited people on very short term contracts when ideally we would have recruited people on longer term contracts. We are aware that the time frame of the project means that having inducted and supported our rangers through their first season we may lose the valuable experience they have gained through the project and will also lose momentum if we are not able to offer follow on employment.” (Successful applicant)

Future funding was also identified as necessary to ensure landowners fulfil their obligations to manage land in a certain way need to be monitored and the relationship maintained to ensure the landowner continues to be willing and able to fulfil their obligations over time; an activity which requires ongoing funding.

Relationship management was identified as a risk, particularly in complex multi-site and multi-organisation projects, partnerships need to be well managed over the long term to ensure continuation of project benefits. It was also noted that volunteer groups and event participants may not stay engaged without continual stimuli from the eNGO. NGO and volunteer group memberships change over time, as do NGO staff, and hence training and engaging new individuals is an ongoing task. Without sufficient funding and NGO action, engagement with therefore diminish over time, reducing the projects' legacy effect.

Changes in the policy landscape were identified as risks by some projects. For example, there are concerns that the new Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes may change incentives for farmers and make holding them to their GRCF agreements harder.

5 Evaluation findings: GRCF value for money

5.1 Introduction

This section considers whether the GRCF provided good value for money, taking account of its impact compared to the resources invested. It will only be possible to assess the value for money of the GRCF when its full impacts can be measured and

compared to the resources invested. At this stage, a partial assessment of whether The Heritage Fund is on course to deliver value for money is provided, based on whether the process of delivery supports this, and the progress to date.

5.2 The resources used by the programme

Overall view

Total grants of £37,778,400 were awarded to projects in GRCF Round 1. Forty-seven projects (out of 69) were awarded ‘medium sized’ grants of between £50,000 and £250,000 and 22 were awarded ‘large grants’ of between £250,000 and £5,000,000. Large projects received a total balance of £28.6 million in funding from the GRCF (76% of the total), while medium projects received £9.2 million (24%).

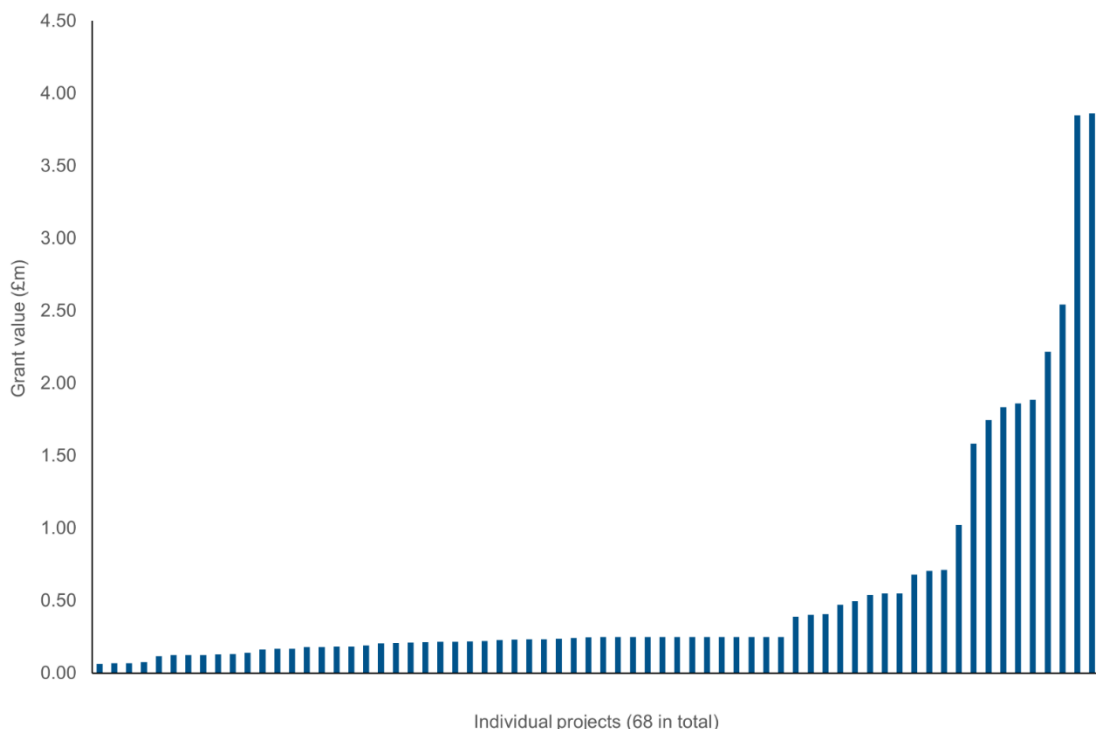
Projects were not required to secure match funding. However, match funding of £6.6million, or 17% of the grant total, was achieved.

The resources used by the programme

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The largest single grant awarded was £3,860,200 and the smallest was £62,600. The median grant awarded was £247,250. Figure 5.1 and Table 5.1 show the distribution of grant values across projects.

Figure 5.1 Distribution of grant values



Source: The Heritage Fund GRCF Round 1 grants database

Table 5.1 Distribution of grant values by project (lowest to highest, £million)

Projects	Grant value	Grant value	Grant value	Grant value	Grant value	Grant value	Grant value	Grant value	Grant value	Grant value
1 st ten projects	0.06	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.12	0.12	0.12	0.12	0.13	0.13
2 nd ten projects	0.14	0.16	0.17	0.17	0.18	0.18	0.18	0.18	0.19	0.21
3 rd ten projects	0.21	0.21	0.21	0.22	0.22	0.22	0.22	0.23	0.23	0.23
4 th ten projects	0.23	0.24	0.24	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25
5 th ten projects	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.39	0.4	0.41
6 th ten projects	0.47	0.5	0.54	0.55	0.55	0.68	0.71	0.71	1.02	1.58
7 th ten projects	1.75	1.83	1.86	1.88	2.22	2.54	3.85	3.86	-	-

Source: The Heritage Fund GRCF Round 1 grants database

44 projects (64%) involve some degree of match funding, while 25 do not. The total budget for the 69 projects amounts to £44.4 million, including match funding of £6.6million, or 17% of the grant total. This relatively low level of match funding is unsurprising, given that the GRCF was launched rapidly with a compressed application period, allowing relatively little time for additional fund raising, and there was no specific requirement for match funding in the first round of the GRCF.

Five projects attracted match funding of more than £400,000, together accounting for two thirds (66%) of total match funding across the portfolio. These projects are:

- Restoring Enfield's Rivers and Connecting Communities (led by London Borough of Enfield) – match funding of £1,201,500 (64% of the project value).
- Realising Greater Manchester's Environmental Ambitions (led by Lancashire Wildlife Trust) - £960,200 (34%).
- Delivering nature-rich historic landscapes, resilient to climate change (led by the National Trust) - £931,175 (19%).
- Ancient woods and trees – delivering landscape recovery and ecological resilience (led by the Woodland Trust) - £804,430 (17%).
- Natural Neighbourhoods - protecting greenspaces and jobs in disadvantaged communities (led by Groundwork UK) - £443,054 (17%).

Six projects mentioned that the GRCF had enabled them to develop activities, services and a local presence that then enabled them to expand or seek additional complementary funding, thus helping to lever in additional resources, while a further four projects mentioned that GRCF had enabled them to develop their capacity, partnership and/or human resource base in a way which should help to enhance future funding opportunities.

5.3 Whether the processes of project selection, programme management, monitoring and evaluation contributed to VFM

Overall view

Overall, the application and decision-making, programme management, monitoring and evaluation processes have so far contributed positively to value for money for the funds invested. However, the high levels of application meant that substantial resources were committed by unsuccessful applicants. The opportunity costs of applying to GRCF were limited – 6% of successful applicants and 27% of unsuccessful applicants surveyed said that they forwent other opportunities to apply to GRCF. At this stage, most of the evidence relates to the processes of applications and project selection.

Whether the processes of project selection, programme management, monitoring and evaluation contributed to VFM

The application and project selection process of the GRCF had to provide funding quickly to environmental NGOs in response to the financial crisis brought by the pandemic. This process also needed to attract applications from, and award funding to, high quality projects that would address the scheme's objectives and deliver value for money for the taxpayer.

The application and project selection processes worked well (see Section 2.2), and stakeholders expressed a common view that they resulted in **the selection of good quality projects that met the objectives of the GRCF and were expected to deliver good value for money**. However, in terms of the resource committed by the wider sector in applying to the GRCF, applicants cited the level of excess demand as evidence that the application process resulted in a large administrative burden for many applicants who had little chance in attaining funding. This suggests that **the process delivered better VFM for the taxpayer than for applicants as a whole**. Even so, successful applicants considered the process to have provided good value for money for the resources invested, while even among unsuccessful applicants.

Interviews with both programme stakeholders and applicants revealed that the EOI stage for large projects was welcomed, helping to limit the time and resources devoted by applicants who had limited chance of success. Some applicants commented that a similar approach could helpfully be extended to medium sized projects, and that this would have reduced the level of oversubscription and the burden on unsuccessful applicants.

Despite the effort involved, the survey also suggests that **the opportunity costs of applying to GRCF were low – that there was no significant impact** in terms of its effect in diverting resources from other funding opportunities. Only 6% of successful applicants said that they forwent other opportunities to apply to GRCF, while 86% did not and 8% were unsure. A larger proportion (27%) of unsuccessful applicants stated that they forwent other opportunities to apply for the GRCF, 57% said they did not and 16% were unsure.

5.4 Could better VFM have been delivered and have lessons been learned that could improve the VFM of future schemes?

Overall view

Overall, the available evidence to date suggests that GRCF has the potential to deliver good value for money from the resources invested, though it is too early to evidence impacts at this stage. The compressed timetable for project applications, selection and delivery has presented challenges for applicants and fund managers, but, overall, a good balance appears to have been struck between delivering funding at pace and securing value for money.

The extraordinary context for the GRCF limits the implications for future funding schemes. However, possible refinements that could be considered when delivering similar types of interventions, including additional GRCF rounds, in future might include:

- Applying a two stage (EOI or informal 'screening' + full application) stage to medium-sized as well as large projects, to limit the overall volume of full-scale applications and resources devoted to them, especially in situations where heavy demand is anticipated. It should be noted that the level of over-subscription of GRCF was not anticipated, and there was insufficient time to test the market before it was launched.
- Linked to the previous point, market testing plays an important role in gauging demand for new funding initiatives, and hence in designing application and project selection processes to manage administrative burdens and enhance value for money.
- Considering whether clearer guidance on eligibility and project selection criteria might discourage lower quality applications, without lowering the volume of higher quality applications, thereby reducing overall application numbers while maintaining quality. The Heritage Fund and Defra revised guidance for applicants in GRCF Round 2 (for example, multiple applications from organisations were not permitted in Round 2).
- Reviewing requirements for match funding of future programmes, recognising that requiring match funding can help to enhance value for taxpayers' money while managing the level of demand. On the other hand, a requirement for match funding may preclude good quality projects, especially for funds like GRCF with a compressed application period, and may prevent the allocation of emergency funding to organisations most in need and unable to secure funding from other sources. Match funding was not required in GRCF Round 1, but a minimum 5% match funding was introduced for larger projects in GRCF Round 2.
- Examining opportunities to extend the delivery timetable for nature investment projects. While the compressed timetable for GRCF was a necessary response to the COVID-19-induced financial crisis, consideration could be given to extending the timetables of future schemes, at least to enable ongoing monitoring and reporting of environmental outcomes, which would be valuable in demonstrating value for money. Even if there was a requirement to spend 90% of GRCF funds by March 2022, reserving a small proportion of the overall budget for follow-up action, monitoring, reporting and evaluation, could help in securing and measuring impact and value for money. An alternative might be to provide

limited top-up funding to target additional resources to projects with specific needs beyond the normal project timetable, where there is demonstrable value for money in so doing.

6 Lessons learnt

Many of the challenges encountered in introducing the GRCF were an inevitable consequence of the unique context in which the GRCF was introduced and related to the very tight timescale in which it was designed and implemented. This unique context may limit the extent to which general lessons can be learned which would be relevant to future programme delivery. The following lessons draw on the evaluation findings as well as lessons learnt exercises already undertaken by Defra, and The Heritage Fund, Environment Agency, Natural England and the Forestry Commission.

6.1 Lesson to improve programme delivery

- Maintaining and further developing the positive working relationship and shared understanding built between Defra group and The Heritage Fund, through ongoing dialogue and moving to a Memorandum of Understanding, thus reducing the need to reinvest in partnership development in future.
- Prioritising a streamlined market research action appropriate for rapid fund design processes, before launching similar funds in future in order to better understand and manage demand and tailor application processes accordingly.
- Ensuring communication systems (including SharePoint and Teams) are fit for purpose in facilitating multi-partner team working on similar initiatives in future.
- Ensuring that online application portals are fit for purpose and capable of handling heavy demand from applicants, particularly around the period close to the application deadline.
- Ensuring that the support available to applicants is the same for all in order to avoid any potential unfair advantage for those able to contact The Heritage Fund individuals directly.
- Considering the development of common indicator sets which can be used to measure the outputs and outcomes of Defra funding programmes earlier in the process, to inform programme design, guidance to applicants (to enable better forecasting of outcomes at application stage), and definition of project M&E plans (to reduce the burden on funded projects from retrofitting project monitoring plans to the requirements and to ensure quality of data). This would improve tracking of progress against targets.
- Improving project monitoring guidance for specific indicators, including jobs and spatial data, in order to improve the quality of data provided and reduce the extent of data gaps.
- Providing more detailed feedback to unsuccessful and successful applicants to promote learning and encourage the development of higher quality applications over time.

6.2 Lessons to improve delivery of targeted project outcomes

- Increasing the scale of funding to better match the scale of demand to ensure more of the sector are able to access emergency funding.
- Offering a parallel emergency funding stream to provide core funding to support eNGO existing activities (which may be at risk), which would be particularly beneficial for (often smaller) eNGOs less able to put forward shovel-ready projects, or those with less capacity to develop a bid at pace.
- Accounting for the risk that projects undertaking seasonally dependent activities early in the project programme may not be sufficiently advanced to deliver, by considering a longer overall timeframe or the potential for ad-hoc project extensions – particularly for future GRCF funding rounds when the potential for COVID-19-induced staff redundancies is less than at the time of GRCF Round 1.
- Exploring how guidance and advice provided by The Heritage Fund might support projects to better understand the time required to secure landowner consents, particularly for projects with short delivery timescales and/or a high volume of sites.
- Maintaining good communications with funded projects to ensure they are aware that, when necessary, they may be flexible in how awarded funding is spent across a project's planned activities and adjust their plans (for example, diverting money from activities that are no longer viable to those where there are cost increases).

6.3 Lessons to improve value for money

- Considering whether there are benefits in applying a two-stage application process. For example, including an EoI or another light touch project shortlisting process – to medium-sized as well as large projects, to limit the overall volume of full-scale applications and resources devoted to them. This would need to take into account resource required to administer this process but could support value for money where heavy demand is anticipated.
- Ensuring market testing of new funds to gauge demand and inform the design of application and project selection processes.
- Considering whether alternative eligibility and project selection criteria might discourage lower quality applications, without lowering the volume of higher quality applications, thereby reducing overall application numbers while maintaining quality.
- Reviewing match funding requirements, and their effects on demand, scheme objectives and overall value for money.
- Examining opportunities to extend the delivery timetable for nature investment projects, even for emergency response funds, which would help in securing and measuring impact and value for money.
- Considering the potential for future funds to provide appropriate follow-on or legacy funding to ensure the longer-term potential of projects is achieved. The benefits of actions that require ongoing funding – in particular new job creation – will be lost if future funding for these roles cannot be secured.