

Darwin Plus Annual Review

Title: Darwin Plus		
Programme Value £ (full life): up to £30m	Review date: November 2023	
Programme Code: DEA10153	Start date: 2022	End date: 2025

Summary of Programme Performance

Year	FY 22/23							
Overall Output Score	A							
Risk Rating	moderate							

DevTracker Link to Business Case:	Darwin Plus 2022-25 Business Case
DevTracker Link to results framework:	Darwin-Plus-Results-Framework-2023-20240717110701.pdf (northeurope.cloudapp.azure.com)

A. SUMMARY AND OVERVIEW [1-1 ½ pages]

Description of programme [1-2 paragraphs]

Darwin Plus is a competitive grants programme that funds projects in support of the unique biodiversity and environments of the UK Overseas Territories (UKOTs). The programme emerged from the Darwin Initiative in 2012 and remains under Defra's Biodiversity Challenge Funds (BCFs) umbrella. The programme funds projects in all fourteen UKOTs, including the three ODA eligible territories of Montserrat, St Helena including Tristan da Cunha, and the Pitcairn Islands.

A note on Darwin Plus ODA Spend and Poverty Reduction

1. This Annual Report covers the whole Darwin Plus programme and does not disaggregate results from the ODA eligible and non-ODA eligible territories.
2. The International Development Act 2002 specifically exempts the ODA eligible territories from the poverty reduction criteria that apply to the rest of the ODA budget. While halting and reversing biodiversity loss and degradation is linked to poverty reduction, poverty reduction itself is not a goal of the Darwin Plus programme.

Between 2012 and March 2023, Darwin Plus supported >260 projects spanning all UKOTs. These projects were funded through the programme's two longstanding grant schemes:

- Darwin Plus Main – the original funding offer for biodiversity projects; and
- Darwin Plus Fellowships – aimed at upskilling UKOT nationals, or those with a close relationship to a UKOT, to increase their knowledge and ability to protect their natural environment.

From March 2023, Defra made available funding through an additional two grant schemes:

- Darwin Plus Local – aimed at increasing accessibility to funding for UKOT nationals and to provide opportunities for smaller-scaled projects that contribute to local economies; and

- Darwin Plus Strategic – designed to provide opportunities for longer-term, larger-scaled projects in and between UKOTs.

The four grant schemes to comprise Darwin Plus, as of November 2023, are summarised in the table below.

Scheme name	Budget	Project Duration	Aims
Darwin Plus Main	£100k-£1m	1-3 years	Supporting environmental projects of benefit to the UKOTs.
Darwin Plus Fellowship	No specific limit	Up to 2 years	Supporting UKOT Nationals, or those with close relationships to an UKOT, to increase their knowledge and ability to protect their natural environments.
Darwin Plus Strategic	£1-3m	3-5 years	For larger-scale, longer-term projects able to drive ambitious outcomes in and between UKOTs.
Darwin Plus Local	≤£20k for individuals; ≤50k for organisations	6 months – 1 year	For smaller-scale, shorter-term projects, led by individuals and organisations based in-territory.

Summary supporting narrative for the overall score in this review [1-2 paragraphs]

A score of A has been allocated to this first Annual Review of the Darwin Plus programme for its high indicative performance and continuous improvement (see justification below).

Overview

Since its inception in 2012, Darwin Plus has consistently attracted and funded high quality applications for projects. Darwin Plus Main was the original funding offer to applicants, with the first Darwin Plus Fellowship project starting soon after in April 2014. By March 2023, Darwin Plus had hosted 11 annual rounds of funding offering Main and Fellowships grants, with successful applicants from Round 11 due to start their projects in April 2023. In addition, the programme had just hosted its first round of Darwin Plus Local, with successful applicants due to start their projects in April 2023.

Historically, funding for Darwin Plus was £2.75m per annum. With HM Treasury's consent, it operated without a business case. From Round 9 of the programme, Defra Ministers approved for Darwin Plus to have access to additional resources, an approach that HMT and Defra Ministers then reaffirmed for the 2020-21 Spending Review (programme Round 10), making up to £10m per annum available to Darwin Plus. The 2022-25 Spending Review (for programme Rounds 11-13) again reaffirmed this financial approach.

As outlined in the Business Case, the £10m per annum made available to Darwin Plus includes up to £3.25m of ODA funding, which is ring fenced and can only be used for ODA-eligible UKOTs and is paid for via ODA budgets. Any underspend in the ODA budget cannot be used on non-ODA territories or transferred to the non-ODA budget. The rest of the £10m is £7.7m of non-ODA funding, which is also ringfenced and cannot be used to fund ODA eligible activities.

Value for money

Applicants are asked directly for justification of how their project proposals secure value for money. Defra also ensures the projects it supports through Darwin Plus present good value for money by awarding grants through a competitive process using assessment criteria, which Defra reviews

annually. Projects are assessed against these criteria by the independent Darwin Plus Advisory Group (DPAG), which is made up of experts with experience of living and/or working in the UKOTs, UK government officials and representatives from relevant statutory advisory bodies.

Ecorys evaluation

The 2022 independent [Ecorys evaluation of the BCFs](#) found that “Darwin Plus projects have a strong, positive impact on the capacity of UKOTs to deliver long-term strategic outcomes for the natural environment, which enhances protection of biodiversity ecosystems in these areas of regional and global biodiversity importance.”

Major programme developments

Strong progress has been made to strengthen and improve the programme over 2022-23: Defra has launched the Darwin Plus Results Framework (Theory of Change, logical framework (logframe) and Standard Indicators) and designed ready for introduction two new tailored funding schemes to better meet the needs of the UKOTs (Darwin Plus Local and Darwin Plus Strategic). Since March 2023, Darwin Plus Local has been funding active projects and, at the time of writing (November 2023), the first application to Darwin Plus Strategic is under assessment.

With respect to the Darwin Plus Fellowships scheme, Defra is proactively finding ways to strengthen this scheme based on the outcomes of a deep-dive and independent review. The deep-dive was hosted by Defra and NIRAS in May 2023 set out to:

1. Determine the composition of funded Fellowships to date in terms of geography, topic, and diversity of applicants;
2. Assess the composition of unsuccessful applications for Fellowships, alongside an understanding of why they were not funded;
3. Investigate how successful Fellowships are across disciplines, geographies and contexts; and
4. Assess longer term impact and outcomes of funded Fellowships alongside recommendation to increase impact.

The outcomes from these reviews are due be reported in next year’s Annual Review (for 2023-2024).

In this reporting period, our ability to effectively measure progress against the newly introduced Standard Indicators is restricted by a small sample size: the new reporting system is still being rolled out and is currently only mandatory for new projects. Despite these limitations, **the available data suggests that most indicators are meeting or exceeding their targets** (see table below). More robust conclusions will be drawn over the next three years as more projects implement the new reporting framework following the introduction of Standard Indicators in mid-2023.

Output no.	Output title	Impact weighting	Progress	Output score
1	Capability and capacity of national and local stakeholders	33%	4 indicators exceeded target 1 indicator missed target	A
2	Policies and management techniques that promote sustainability are implemented	33%	2 indicators exceeded target 1 indicator met target 3 indicators missed target	B
3	Evidence is produced which can be used to guide future biodiversity management and policies	33%	2 indicators exceeded target 2 indicators met target	A

	(as well as future Darwin projects)		1 indicator missed target	
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Major lessons and recommendations for the year ahead [1/2 page]

Key recommendations:

1. Improve Darwin Plus communications and outreach from FY23/24.

- Encourage applications from underserved/underrepresented groups by diversifying our communications activities to raise awareness of Darwin Plus.
 - Targeted engagement should focus on communication channels commonly used in the UKOTs (local radio and newspapers). Darwin Plus' social media presence should also continue to be enhanced and utilised to showcase new funding rounds and the progress of ongoing projects.
- Reduce the number of ineligible applications we receive (and also simplify the process for applicants) by restructuring and clarifying the application guidance packs.

2. Publish a review on Darwin Plus Local

- Analyse the performance of Darwin Plus Local against its aims by reviewing its activities and outputs.
 - As of November 2023, this new scheme has hosted three funding rounds since its launch in January 2023, with projects from Rounds 1 and 2 due to submit their final reports in April 2024.
 - The scheme was introduced to increase accessibility to funding for UKOT-based individuals and organisations. It is a new approach for the programme and awards smaller grants via a simplified application process compared to other Darwin Plus schemes. The introduction of this scheme warrants its own light-touch, focused review to assess how it is performing and how well it is being received by applicants.
 - The review could be conducted by Defra in partnership with JNCC and the fund manager (NIRAS).

3. Consolidate and accelerate activities to strengthen the delivery and ambition of Workstream 5: Building and Applying Evidence.

In collaboration with NIRAS, Defra has made good progress introducing systems and approaches to manage this workstream across the BCFs, particularly following the Darwin Plus Fellowships deep-dive completed in May 2023. There is untapped potential for a stronger evidence base underpinning Darwin Plus and the wider BCFs programme: moving forward, progress can be realised with the strengthened capability and capacity that both Defra and NIRAS have secured in the past year, for managing and evidencing Darwin Plus. A new BCF workplan should be in place by April 2024 and followed by a workshop to refine the Darwin Plus logframe and Theory of Change.

4. Develop and create cloud-based database to securely hold and make accessible project data.

The current system to manage post-award grant data offline across the BCFs is outdated and inflexible. Plans to address this were interrupted by the contract renewal process with NIRAS and Defra's focus on upscaling the programme, but efforts to address the risks of the current

system and capitalise on the opportunities of a cloud-based system should now be prioritised with a new system in place by March 2025

5. Strengthen capacity to provide assurance and support to meet ODA obligations including strengthened risk management, safeguarding (human rights, and SEAH) and transparency.

At the time of writing (November 2023), a safeguarding specialist has been recruited for the BCFs by NIRAS and is due to start in December 2023. This person will ensure that risks associated with Health, Safety and Security, as well as SEAH, will be addressed and mitigated appropriately.

B: THEORY OF CHANGE AND PROGRESS TOWARDS OUTCOMES [1-2 pages]

Summarise the programme’s **theory of change**, including any changes to outcome and impact indicators from the original business case. [1/2 page]

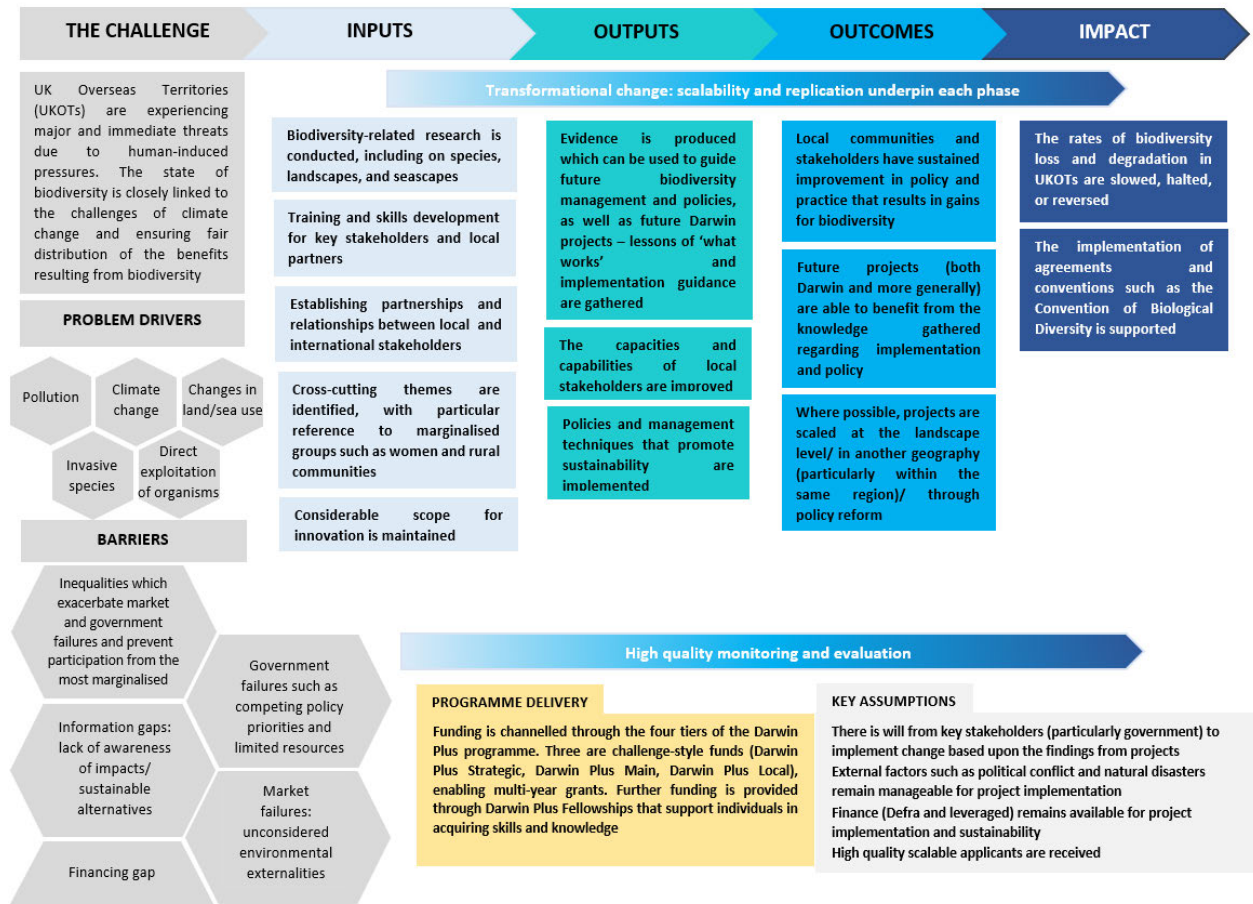


Figure 1: Draft theory of change from Darwin Plus 2022 Business Case

The above Theory of Change was developed for the 2022 Darwin Plus Business Case and systematically shows activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact.

Alongside the Theory of Change, an indicative logframe was drafted. As of mid-2023, reporting on impact, output and outcome indicators in this logframe has been supported by the introduction of Standard Indicators as part of a new reporting framework implemented across the BCFs. These indicators are facilitating the aggregation of results across all projects supported by Darwin Plus, and

likewise the disaggregation of results to better understand - for example - which taxonomic groups might have experienced improved conservation status, or the gender of project beneficiaries. Already the new indicators are supporting our understanding of whether projects are doing what they set out to achieve. Together with project reporting and reviews, evaluations and expert advice, the new indicators are providing us with a key source of evidence to inform programme governance and decision-making in support of project performance.

The following outcome indicators originally proposed in the Business Case for Darwin Plus were:

- Leverage achieved by projects at application.
- Number of people with improved outcomes:
 - i. Education
 - ii. Training
 - iii. Income
 - iv. Disaster/climate resilience
 (All disaggregated by gender.)
Target: Between 4540 – 8088 individual beneficiaries of these activities (for i and ii).
- Proportion of grants awarded to high quality applications received.

These have since been further developed by Defra to the new Standard Indicators detailed in the table below. Each indicator group is then broken down into a longer menu of more specific core indicators and additional Standard Indicators from which projects can choose.¹

	Darwin Plus Standard Indicator Group
A	Capability and capacity
B	Policies, Practices and Management
C	Evidence and Best Practices
D	Sustainable Benefits to People, Biodiversity and Climate
E	Impact on Biodiversity and People

Reminder: The International Development Act 2002 specifically exempts the ODA eligible territories from the poverty reduction criteria that apply to the rest of the ODA budget. While halting and reversing biodiversity loss and degradation is linked to poverty reduction, poverty reduction itself is not a goal of the Darwin Plus programme.

Describe where the programme is on/off track to contribute to the expected outcomes and impact. What action is planned in the year ahead? [1/2 page]

Analysis has been carried out to assess delivery against the new Standard Indicators by existing projects that have received funding in this reporting period. Please refer to the Darwin Plus Results Framework: Theory of Change, Draft Logframe with 2023 Results, which is available on Devtracker.

Projects are asked to choose from a “menu” of Standard Indicators (all of which form part of the logframe) and report on these. Each indicator group is broken down into a longer menu of more specific core indicators and additional Standard Indicators from which projects can choose. Data from the projects reporting on each standard indicator is collated for fund level results.

¹ The Darwin Plus Standard Indicators List (April 2023) can be found here: <https://darwinplus.org.uk/media/s2qb5mst/dplus-standard-indicators-guidance-april-2023.pdf>

Only projects that started in 2023 or after are required to report using the Standard Indicators, so while this system is still being rolled out the data available is quite limited². This makes it impossible to accurately score progress across the full suite of live and completed projects, so the results presented here should be viewed as indicative only. Reporting is expected to become more comprehensive and reliable over the following three years as all new projects implement the new system.

When fully rolled out, the core indicators will allow for better aggregation of information across all BCF projects and hence a fuller understanding of BCF achievements.

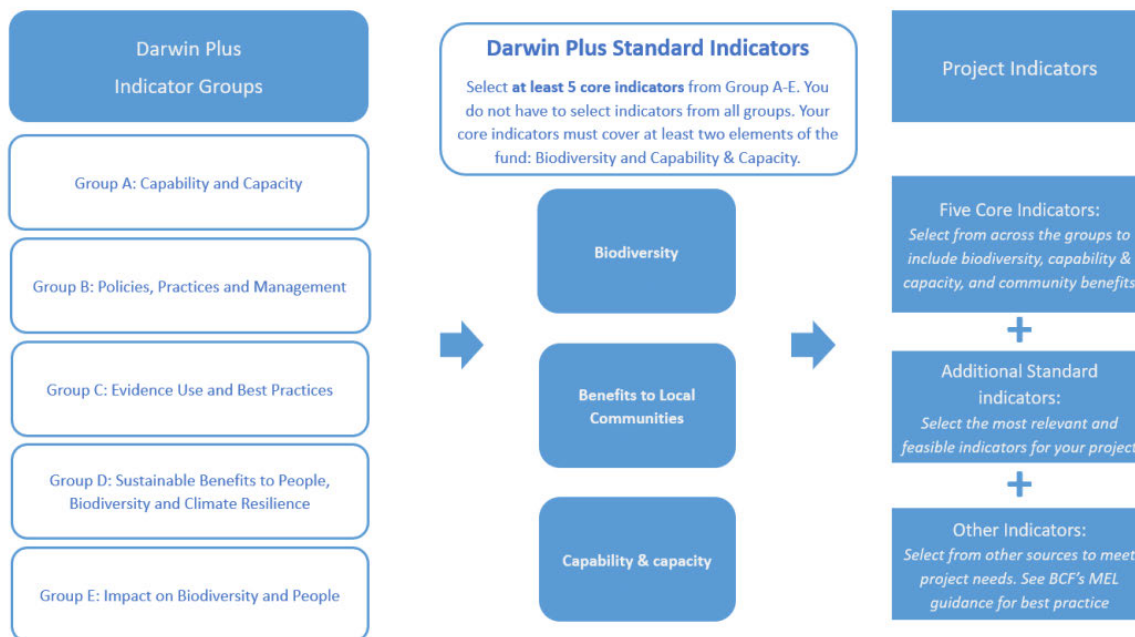


Figure 2: System for Grantees to select Darwin Plus Standard Indicators.

Results detailed here and in Section C come from 46 projects (approximate total value £13,570,597, plus £5,096,210 planned matched funding and £978,788 planned mobilised funding). This 46 includes only those projects that have submitted an annual report (i.e. no first-year projects, for which reporting is mandatory) and those that have reported against the Standard Indicators. This is out of a total active portfolio of 64 projects. The results below have been self-reported by existing projects on a voluntary basis, and this – alongside the issue that the new reporting system using Standard Indicators is still being rolled out – is likely to have led to significant under-reporting of results for existing projects.

The Theory of Change explains the overall intended impact of Darwin Plus: rates of biodiversity loss and degradation are slowed, halted or reversed in the UKOTs. Four potential impact indicators have been selected to measure progress in this respect:

1. Status of UKOT threatened endemic species (indicator currently being developed alongside JNCC).
2. Extent and condition of terrestrial and marine protected areas in UKOTs (indicator currently being developed alongside JNCC).

² Prior to this, each project had its own indicators used to assess results and impact, but these were not standardized across the Fund.

3. National Biodiversity Strategies and Action plans.
4. Transformational change (methodology to be developed)

Progress towards achieving overall impact has not been assessed because methodologies for measuring progress on potential impact indicators 3 and 4 have not yet been developed. However, Significant progress has been made towards measuring potential impact indicators 1 and 2: as part of Defra's 25 Year Environment Plan, JNCC have published two interim reports against the plan's International Outcome Indicators:

- [K3: Status of endemic and globally threatened species in the UK Overseas Territories](#)
- [K4: Extent and condition of terrestrial and marine protected areas in the UK Overseas Territories](#)

Progress towards achieving outcome indicators is also difficult to measure, given reporting against these was very low. To improve reporting in future, there may be a need to introduce different outcome indicators, and/or to support grantees to better evaluate their outcomes. This stage of the Standard Indicators roll-out is a timely opportunity to refine the logframe and reporting framework.

To address the challenges related to low levels of impact and outcome data, the results framework will be updated to ensure it is meaningful (based on feedback from grantees and lessons learned during the first year of application), methodologies for outcome indicators will be developed and shared with grantees, and a workshop is proposed to take place in 2024 to refine and update the logframe and Theory of Change (these are discussed in more detail under recommendations listed in Section C below).

Outcome: Local communities and stakeholders have sustained improvement in policy and practice that results in gains for biodiversity			
Overall indicator	Relevant Indicator(s) and associated results		
	Indicator(s)	Milestone(s) for this review	Progress
Indicator 1.1 Area under Ecological Management (ha) (DEFRA / ICF KPI 17)	Hectares of habitat under sustainable management practices	208 ha	26 ha (from 2 projects reporting)
Indicator 1.2 Number of people with improved or protected i) livelihoods (Defra KPI), ii) disaster/climate resilience (ICF KPI 4), iii) water/food security	Number of people whose disaster/climate resilience has been improved	0	0
	Number of households reporting improved livelihoods	0	0
	Income derived by local communities from new/enhanced Payment for Ecosystem Services	0	0
Indicator 1.3 Number of policies with biodiversity provisions that have been enacted or amended	Number of policies with biodiversity provisions that have been enacted or amended	1	0

Justify whether the programme should continue, based on its own merits and in the context of the wider portfolio [1 paragraph]

Results from the early stage of rolling out Standard Indicators show that most output indicators are meeting or exceeding their targets. Plans and resource are in place to better measure outcomes and impact, and positive results are expected. Next year, Defra and NIRAS will workshop improvements to the logframe and Theory of Change, and continue to optimise indicators and fund guidance based on feedback which is routinely received from applicants and grantees. More broadly, Defra and NIRAS will continue to develop methodologies to better measure outcomes and impact indicators for all funds they manage.

Prior to 2022, evaluation had only occurred at an individual project level. Following publication of the Ecorys report, evaluation was then provided for at programme level. The report found that “Darwin Plus projects have a strong, positive impact on the capacity of UKOTs to deliver long-term strategic outcomes for the natural environment, which enhances protection of biodiversity ecosystems in these areas of regional and global biodiversity importance.” The report went on to state that the UKOTs “have limited financial and human resources and there is a pressing need for better environmental and biodiversity management. Darwin Plus is currently the only [Defra] fund that explicitly promotes biodiversity in UKOTs and thus, through strengthening institutional capacity to protect nature there, is uniquely relevant.”

The Darwin Plus programme should thus continue because:

1. The UKOTs host 94% of known endemic British species³ and the UK Government has a moral and constitutional obligation to support the UKOTs to protect these unique environments;
2. It has demonstrated positive impact in the UKOTs, as shown in this review and the Ecorys report; and
3. It has a unique role within Defra as a dedicated funding source for biodiversity in the UKOTs.

³ Churchyard, T., Eaton, M., Hall, J., Millett, J., Farr, A., Cuthbert, R. & Stringer, C. (2014). The UK's wildlife overseas: a stocktake of nature in our Overseas Territories. RSPB, Sandy, UK.

C. DETAILED OUTPUT SCORING [aim for 1 page per output]

Output Title	Capability and capacity of national and local stakeholders		
Output number:	1	Output Score:	A
Impact weighting (%):	33%	Weighting revised since last AR?	N/A

C1. Briefly describe the output's activities, and provide supporting narrative for the score. [max 1/2 page]

Overall Indicator(s)	Relevant Indicator(s) and associated results		
	Indicator(s)	Milestone(s) for this review	Progress
1.1. Number of people from key local and national stakeholders receiving training/new skills	Number of people from key national and local stakeholders completing structured and relevant training	240 people	602 people (from 18 projects reporting)
	Number of secondments or placements completed by individuals of key local and national stakeholders	1 person	0 people (from 0 projects reporting)
	Number of people reporting that they are applying new capabilities (skills and knowledge) 6 (or more) months after training	17 people	128 people (from 5 projects reporting)
	Number of trainers trained reporting to have delivered further training by the end of the project	2 people	7 people (from 3 projects reporting)
1.2. Number of key local and national organisations with improved capability and capacity as a result of project	Number of local/national organisations with improved capability and capacity as a result of project	12 organisations	32 organisations (from 11 projects reporting)

Note: because projects don't estimate plans/targets each year of operation, milestones/targets here are based on aggregated fund level project plans (speculated during project design phases and approved by the DPAG and Programme Board to ensure value for money), with an adjustment made for fund level expenditure and project duration

Results have far exceeded targets for 2022/23 for the following four indicators: number of people from key national and local stakeholders completing structured and relevant training, number of people reporting that they are applying new capabilities (skills and knowledge) six (or more) months after training, number of trainers trained reporting to have delivered further training by the end of the project, and number of local/national organisations with improved capability and capacity as a result of project. The anticipated milestone on number of secondments or placements completed by individuals of key local and national stakeholders was not met. With few projects (only those that started in 2023) using the new Standard Indicators, however, results here should only be viewed as indicative of overall progress.

There have been many notable achievements in this reporting period, **examples** include:

- [DPLUS104](#) Conserving St Helena’s endemic invertebrates through invasive invertebrate control (final report): This project successfully built on-island capacity for invasive invertebrate control and engaged the wider public through various events and a programme of citizen science. It reports a 98% reduction in numbers of invasive big-headed ants in its target areas, with the first signs of recovery of native invertebrates. Control methods for the ant are set to continue beyond the lifetime of the project.
- [DPLUS105](#) Building capacity to make Montserrat a mountain chicken refuge (final report): This project has enhanced conservation capacity exists within Montserrat Department of Environment through newly recruited and highly trained Project Officers.
- [DPLUS155](#) Securing Montserrat’s threatened endemic species and natural capital through community-action (annual report): This project has enabled Montserradians to make informed decisions and actions on land they manage, via training and advice to 100 individuals, so Montserrat’s unique wildlife and ecosystems thrive.

C2. Describe any changes to this output during the past year, and any planned changes as a result of this review. [1 paragraph]

Indicators originally proposed for Output 1 were:

- Number of local communities, and stakeholders with improved capability.
- Number of grants awarded to applicants based in the UKOTs.
- Number of people completing education/training (disaggregated by gender).
Target: between 3126 – 5569 people trained/educated for the full Programme period (not just in this reporting period).
- Number of people attaining other accredited qualifications other than a Masters or PhD qualification (disaggregated by gender).

These have changed to the output indicators detailed in the table above.

C3. Progress on recommendations from the previous AR (if completed), lessons learned this year and recommendations for the year ahead [1-2 paragraphs]

There has been no previous annual review of Darwin Plus. Recommendations on increasing reporting against the Standard Indicators (including data disaggregation) and reviewing targets/milestones are detailed under Output 3 below.

Output Title	Policies and management techniques that promote sustainability are implemented		
Output number:	2	Output Score:	B
Impact weighting (%):	33%	Weighting revised since last AR?	N/A

C1. Briefly describe the output's activities, and provide supporting narrative for the score. [max 1/2 page]

Overall Indicator(s)	Relevant Indicator(s) and associated results	Milestone(s) for this review	Progress
	Indicator(s)		
2.1. Number of new/improved biodiversity (species/habitat) or community management plans available and endorsed	Number of new/improved habitat management plans available and endorsed	3 plans	7 plans (from 3 projects reporting)
	Number of new/improved species management plans available and endorsed	4 plans	1 plan (from 1 project reporting)
	Number of new/improved community management plans available and endorsed	3 plans	10 plans (from 1 project reporting)
	Number of new/improved sustainable livelihoods/ poverty reduction management plans available and endorsed	1 plan	0 plans (from 0 projects reporting)
2.2. Number of people with increased participation in local communities / local management organisations	Number of people with increased participation in local communities / local management organisations (i.e., participation in Governance/citizen engagement).	26 people	22 people (from 2 projects reporting)
2.3. Number of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (people) with strengthened (recognised/clarified) tenure and/or rights	Number of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (people) with strengthened (recognised/clarified) tenure and/or rights	0 people	0 people (from 0 projects reporting)

N.B. Overall Indicators 2.2 and 2.3 are applicable only in the inhabited UKOTs.

Some indicators met/exceeded milestone targets, and some did not. At this early stage in standard indicator roll-out and reporting, robust conclusions cannot be drawn from this because few projects (only those that started in 2023) are using the new Standard Indicators. In addition, milestones/targets are not calculated for each year of operation, but rather based on aggregated fund level project plans (speculated during project design phases and approved by the Darwin Plus Advisory Group and Programme Board to ensure value for money), with an adjustment made for fund level expenditure and project duration.

There have been many notable achievements in this reporting period, **examples** include:

- [DPLUS154](#) Sustainable management planning for St Helena’s National Conservation Areas (annual report): This project is working to secure the legal status of St Helena’s National Conservation Areas by developing sustainable-use National Conservation Area management plans, including analytical tools and framework to monitor their effectiveness.
- [DPLUS137](#) Transforming Anguilla’s Marine Parks: institutionalising sustainable and collaborative management solutions (annual report): This project is formalising informal co-management arrangements while identifying and developing sustainable revenue mechanisms and management plans for the benefit of Anguilla’s marine biodiversity, coastal resiliency to climate change and alternative livelihood opportunities for coastal communities.

C2. Describe any changes to this output during the past year, and any planned changes as a result of this review. [1 paragraph]

Indicators originally proposed in the Business Case for Output 2 were:

- Number of new/improved biodiversity (species/habitat) management plans (including sustainable use, restoration and invasive species control). *Target: between 149 – 263 action plans produced for the full programme period (not just in this reporting period).*
- Number of policies strengthened, developed or formally contributed to at local and national levels on biodiversity reduction issues by projects.

These have since been further developed by Defra to the output indicators detailed in the table above.

C3. Progress on recommendations from the previous AR (if completed), lessons learned this year and recommendations for the year ahead [1-2 paragraphs]

N/A – there has been no previous annual review of Darwin Plus.

Output Title	Evidence is produced which can be used to guide future biodiversity management and policies (as well as future Darwin projects)		
Output number:	3	Output Score:	A
Impact weighting (%):	33%	Weighting revised since last AR?	N/A

C1. Briefly describe the output's activities, and provide supporting narrative for the score. [max 1/2 page]

Overall Indicator(s)	Relevant Indicator(s) and associated results		
	Indicator(s)	Milestone(s) for this review	Progress
3.1. Number of best practice guides and knowledge products developed, published and endorsed	Number of best practice guides and knowledge products published and endorsed	9 knowledge products	38 (from 6 projects reporting)
3.2. No. of assessments conducted and published	Number of new conservation or species stock assessments published	10 assessments	0 (from 0 projects reporting)
	New assessments of habitat conservation action needs published	1 assessment	1 (from 1 project reporting)
	New assessments of community use of biodiversity resources published	1 assessment	1 (from 1 project reporting)
3.3. Number of projects contributing data, insights and case studies to national MEA related reporting processes and calls for evidence	Number of projects contributing data, insights, and case studies to national Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) related reporting processes and calls for evidence	4	9 (from 5 projects reporting)

Note: because projects don't estimate plans/targets each year of operation, milestones/targets here are based on aggregated fund level project plans (speculated during project design phases and approved by the Darwin Plus Advisory Committee and Programme Board to ensure value for money), with an adjustment made for fund level expenditure and project duration

Annual variation in 'Number of new conservation or species stock assessments published' is apparent in that 0 projects reported results in the current year, but a single KBG project plans 100 conservation assessments over the 2024–2025 reporting period, with a further 42 planned by 9 other projects. This type of variation can skew the reporting from year to year. All other indicators met / exceeded targets.

There have been many notable achievements in this reporting period, **examples** include:

- [DPLUS181](#) East Caicos Wilderness Area: Protecting the Caribbean's largest uninhabited island (annual report): This project will create a locally driven participatory resource management plan for East Caicos, develop local livelihood opportunities, and strengthen local capacity for the island's effective management.

- [DPLUS106](#) A Marine Turtle Action Plan for Montserrat (final report): This project has worked alongside the Government of Montserrat Fisheries and Oceans Governance Unit to provide the scientific evidence and training required to update current monitoring and management practices and to engage the community on their attitudes towards turtles and their conservation. This has resulted in the development and implementation of a Marine Turtle Species Action Plan for Montserrat. Please see this [webpage](#) to find out about their use of the Community Voice Method to capture views on turtle management and protection.
- [DPLUS168](#) Understanding increased Falkland Islands seal bycatch to inform bycatch Action Plan (annual report): This project is assessing why there has been an increase in seal-fishery interactions, and how the increase impacts local fisheries and marine ecosystems. The findings will be used to produce recommendations and guidance, which will help align current long-term management objectives into action plans supporting Fisheries and Oceans Governance. Please see this [article](#) for more information.
- [DPLUS139](#) Improving Falklands marine management effectiveness for marine higher predators (final report). This project has collected tracking data of Falkland Islands high-seas predators and revealed that these species range very broadly across the Patagonian Shelf. While fixed boundary approaches to conservation like Marine Managed Areas are indisputably important in conserving seabirds and seals, this data demonstrates that an extensive, Ecosystem-Based Management approach to conservation is also required, incorporating measures such as bycatch mitigation.

C2. Describe any changes to this output during the past year, and any planned changes as a result of this review. [1 paragraph]

Indicators originally proposed in the Business Case for Output 3 were:

- Number of species reference collections enhanced and handed over to host country(s)
- Number of formal documents produced to assist work related to species identification, classification and recording. *Target: between 173 - 313 formal documents produced for the full programme period (not just in this reporting period).*
- Number of conferences/seminars/workshops organised to present/disseminate Findings from Darwin project work.
Target: between 247 – 439 conferences/seminars/workshops organised for the full programme period (not just in this reporting period).

These have been further developed by Defra to the output indicators detailed in the table above.

C3. Progress on recommendations from the previous AR (if completed), lessons learned this year and recommendations for the year ahead [1-2 paragraphs]

A workplan on 'Building and Applying Evidence' has been developed across the BCFs and is operational. The workplan supports the strengthening of programme results and logframe application, and the collation and sharing of evidence and refined best practices, based on robust analysis and evaluation of the portfolio and projects, to inform programme governance and wider decision making by stakeholders. To support this activity, analytical resource has been put in place, both within Defra and NIRAS. This is allowing Defra to lead and engage with such activity (mainly delivered by NIRAS) with the right analytical capability.

Recommendations:

- Following the successful development and early-stage roll-out of Standard Indicators and the associated results framework, the draft logframe and indicators should be finalised and refined to ensure they are appropriate, meaningful and can capture (and facilitate collation of) relevant results. Outcome indicators, for example, have been reported against very little, which signals a need to a) specify different outcome indicators for Darwin Plus, or b) support grantees to better evaluate these outcomes if they are determined to be in line with the fund objectives. The Darwin Plus logframe was drafted to align with the Darwin Initiative logframe, but further revisions and tailoring are now needed to improve clarity and to make it more Darwin Plus specific for future reporting cycles. Feedback from grantees and applicants on the process is being collected to support this process of refinement. ‘Standard Indicators Guidance’ for grantees and ‘Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Guidance’ for grantees may also need updating if changes are made to the process. A workshop should be held in 2024 to test and refine the logframe and Theory of Change hypotheses and assumptions, and to ensure consistency between the logframe and Theory of Change.
- Improve the process for determining (when this is feasible and can be meaningful) targets and milestones for indicators by summer 2024. Targets were set last year, but this was before Standard Indicators were developed so the process has since been adjusted and further refinement is needed. This will require improvements in determining targeted results per year and over the whole project lifetime.
- Efforts to secure disaggregated results (especially on gender) should continue for relevant people indicators to address the challenge of low reporting on this to date (which is in part due to the fact that the new Standard Indicators and results framework are in the early stages of roll-out). This includes planned results (not all projects have disaggregated plans), and it includes a refresh of indicators to support greater social inclusion and gender related disaggregation. This should be on an annual basis and will help articulate the fund’s contribution to multi-dimensional poverty reduction (including gender and other equalities considerations) in line with the Public Sector Equality Duty (Non-ODA) and International Development Act (ODA). Defra and NIRAS staff capacity to strengthen the BCF’ approach to Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) has increased, which is supporting this process.
- Develop methodologies for indicators where they are missing by the end of 2024. At the outcome level, a methodology is needed to measure hectares of habitat under sustainable management practices, number of households reporting improved livelihoods and also the number of people whose disaster/climate resilience has been improved. Ways to assess progress on all impact indicators (once these are finalised) need to be determined. These methodologies need to recognise and align with International Climate Finance (ICF) KPI methodologies and align with emerging Defra International KPI methodologies where appropriate. Plans to measure and monitor progress on these indicators are already in place with the Darwin Plus Results Framework reporting process.
- Continue to strengthen the ‘Building and Applying Evidence’ workplan (Workstream 5), which covers the three BCFs. This workstream supports the generation, collation and sharing of evidence and best practice, based on robust analysis and evaluation of the portfolio and projects, to inform programme governance and wider decision making by stakeholders. The workstream has two main approaches:
 - Synthesis of standardised project level data, which allows for data to be aggregated and summarised; and
 - Deep-dive synthesis studies focusing on discrete learning questions.

These two approaches are detailed in the September 2022 paper “Building and applying evidence for Biodiversity Challenge Funds – Workstream 5; Methodology for evidence building and synthesis”. Both these approaches are now being applied, but as roll-out of the Standard Indicators strengthens the opportunities for data collation and learning from deep-dives and results across all BCF projects, it will become increasingly important to share emerging learning. Defra and NIRAS resource to support activity on lesson learning, results and evaluation across the BCFs has increased to support this process. In addition, strengthening Workstream 5 in 2024 will involve developing an updated ‘methodology for evidence building and synthesis, and finalising previous deep-dive topics by June 2024.

Value for money

The Business Case set out the value for money of the proposed Darwin Plus programme based on the Four Es:

- **Economy** is achieved through:
 - o The competitive procurement of a fund manager (this role was contracted to NIRAS); and
 - o The DPAG’s expert assessment of applications, selecting the highest quality projects for funding by considering the technical merit biodiversity/environmental impact of the project, as well how the applications demonstrate economy and appropriate price consideration.
- **Efficiency and Effectiveness** is delivered through:
 - o The DPAG expert assessment of applications, selecting projects that can demonstrate strong delivery of outputs and outcomes;
 - o Flexible management across the programme, which helps projects with demonstrated potential to achieve strong outputs and outcomes are scaled up;
 - o Knowledge sharing, and evidence and enhanced capability components, which strengthen the overall efficiency and effectiveness of Darwin Plus; and
 - o The restructuring Darwin Plus, which will further increase the effectiveness of the fund by providing a scaling pathway for the best Darwin projects to grow their impacts by receiving funding from the Darwin Plus Strategic tier.

In addition, the independent Ecorys evaluation of Darwin Plus, when assessing its efficiency and effectiveness, reported widespread agreement amongst strategic stakeholders that the scheme provides very good value for money and evidence that some projects have directly contributed to reduced key threats to UKOTs’ natural environments, including unsustainable management and use of resources, climate change, invasive species, and plastic waste pollution.⁴

- **Equity** will be delivered through:
 - o Projects contributing to reducing inequality, including gender inequality, with the roll out of the Standard Indicators to better monitor this;
 - o Open and transparent funding mechanisms, which provide equal opportunities to a range of implementing partners to obtain funding for good quality projects;
 - o The requirement of projects to report the gender of beneficiaries and expectation to provide indicators disaggregated by sex where possible;

⁴ See: Ecorys (2021) Darwin Initiative, Darwin Plus and Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund Scheme evaluation: Final report (Last accessed 03/12/2021)

- o The introduction of the Darwin Plus Local scheme, which aims to build in-territory capability and support the local economies.

It is not possible to comprehensively assess actual performance against the value for money expected at this stage. Further data and analysis are needed, as well as improved reporting on post-project finance. Under the Workstream 'Building and Applying Evidence', a deep-dive has been commissioned to explore the potential for a process of regular, systematic assessment of value for money in BCF-funded projects. This is expected to complete in 2024, with recommendations.

This annual review nonetheless makes several observations, which indicate good value for money.

Economy:

- The new Local Tier Delivery team (JNCC) contract was awarded following a cost-benefit analysis of three shortlisted candidates. Darwin Plus Local Round 1 launched in January 2023, with the first projects commencing April 2023.

Efficiency and Effectiveness:

- The assessment of proposals is robust with each application reviewed by a panel of senior experts (DPAG for Darwin Plus Main and Fellowships, and JNCC for Darwin Plus Local), identifying those that can demonstrate strong delivery of outputs and outcomes and value for money.
- The Darwin Plus Strategic scheme, which launched in April 2023 just after the reporting period, will enable projects that have the potential to deliver strong outputs and outcomes at scale.

Equity:

- Darwin Plus Local projects are partly selected on their potential to build capacity in-territory and contribute to local economies.
- Darwin Plus Fellowships intend to enable the upskilling of UKOT nationals and/or long-term residents and/or those with a long-term relationship with a UKOT where it does not have a permanent resident population, to increase their knowledge and ability to meet long-term strategic outcomes for the natural environment in UKOTs.
- Fair and equitable access to finance, for good quality projects, is an operating principle with transparent funding mechanisms.
- In early 2023, Defra commissioned a review of the extent to which its ODA programme considered and advanced gender equality and social inclusion.
- Following a deep-dive on Gender, Equality and Social Inclusion (including indigenous people and local communities) applying to all three BCFs, Defra is developing a multiyear GESI strategy to action recommendations: the GESI Strategy and five-year action plan will set out how to ensure that all projects funded by the BCFs are sensitive to GESI by 2028.
- Applicant guidance and capacity building activities have been updated, encouraging applicants and projects to focus on meaningful participation and engagement of women and marginalised groups, with a stronger focus on social inclusion. Disaggregation of relevant indicators such as "1.1. Number of people from key local and national stakeholders receiving training/new skills" will be an important part of understanding Darwin Plus' performance in terms of GESI.
- Applicants are being advised to disaggregate more data on outcomes and impact indicators by age and gender. NIRAS is updating its programme-wide spreadsheets to capture this disaggregated data.

- A new safeguarding specialist, who has been recruited for the BCFs by NIRAS and will start in December 2023.
- Currently, Darwin Plus Main projects are required to promote equality between persons of different gender and social characteristics and explain in their reports how the projects have proactively contributed to ensuring individuals achieve equitable outcomes. Darwin Plus Strategic projects will be subject to this same requirement. Darwin Plus Local projects, where appropriate, must make all reasonable and adequate efforts to address gender inequality and other power imbalances.

D: RISK

Overview of risk management

The established approach to risk management remains strong with regular quarterly meetings held to review programme-level risks; where issues materialise, these are managed and monitored appropriately.

The risk framework has been updated to align with new Defra guidance with reformulated Risk Types and Scales; the conversion to the new risk guidance has not resulted in substantive changes to the actual risk assessments or mitigations.

The overall risk of the programme is assessed as **moderate**.

Table 1. High level programme risks

Risk Type	Indicative High-Level Risks	Impact	Probability ⁵	Gross Risk	Mitigation	Residual Risk
Contextual	Risk of operating in politically volatile, economically unstable and environmentally vulnerable (e.g. natural disasters) contexts or experiencing unexpected or unforeseen events ██████████ ██████████	Major	Low	Moderate	<i>Reduce:</i> Political, security and meteorological assessments conducted where appropriate to inform decisions and project risk frameworks. Ongoing engagement and analysis to monitor of risk, with FCDO, Fund Manager [NIRAS] and Defra support.	Minor
	Some projects fall short on gender, equity and social inclusion (GESI)	Major	Likely	Major	<i>Reduce:</i> Applicants required to detail how their project would contribute to GESI. Defra ensures sufficient GESI expertise on Darwin Plus Advisory Group. The Advisory Group assesses each application for its contribution to GESI. Applicants encouraged to conduct GESI analysis early in project cycle, measure progress towards project-level GESI objectives, monitor GESI-related risks, and report progress and risks to Defra via project logframe. Forthcoming GESI Strategy ensures that these measures are mainstreamed into programme processes.	Minor
Delivery	Risk of physically and logistically challenging natural environments, implementing a portfolio of often novel activities. These include marine and terrestrial landscapes with a variety of terrain, often located on remote islands. Risk of Covid-19 impacting forecasting/ future activities or the capacity to maintain plans. Risk of some UKOTs being unsuccessful at application stage due to lack of experience/capacity	Major	Likely	Severe	<i>Transfer and Reduce:</i> Fund Manager [NIRAS] sets clear forecasts, reporting and monitoring. Clear guidance on change requests and quarterly payment processes supports adaptive delivery. Projects will be assessed on financial risks, forecasting, and demonstrate experience of successfully working in such environments. Ongoing engagement and analysis to monitor of risk, with FCDO, Fund Manager [NIRAS] and Defra to support projects affected. Darwin Plus Local is building capacity and experience in the UKOTs and providing a training ground for applications to the other grant schemes.	Major

⁵ Likelihood: Almost certain (>80%), Likely (>50%<80%), Possible (>20%<50%), Unlikely (>5%<20%), Rare (<5%)

<p>Safeguarding</p>	<p>Risk of programme or partner staff doing harm or not reporting incidences of sexual exploitation, abuse, harassment or bullying.</p>	<p>Severe</p>	<p>Possible</p>	<p>Severe</p>	<p><i>Reduce:</i> Maintain, via the Fund Manager [NIRAS], close oversight and due diligence of activities across portfolio, providing training and advice to delivery partners, requiring a robust safeguarding policy in place including systems to enable reporting and support whistle-blowers.</p>	<p>Moderate</p>
<p>Operational</p>	<p>Risk of Covid-19 impacting HMG's capacity</p> <p>Risk of complexity in Fund's management structure</p> <p>Risk of established projects being difficult to stop quickly</p> <p>Risk of ODA-eligible UKOTs graduating out of the ODA list and in-progress projects no longer eligible for ODA funding.</p> <p>Risk of overspend</p>	<p>Moderate</p>	<p>Possible</p>	<p>Major</p>	<p><i>Share:</i> Strong governance with clear ToRs, comprehensive documentation of processes, manage vacancy rate and reduced complexity of funds.</p> <p>Closely monitor quarterly reports to inform whether to stop projects/challenge funding. Include provisions in grant agreements to dictate process by which funding can be withdrawn.</p> <p>Ongoing engagement and analysis to monitor of risk of ODA graduation and working with FCDO, Fund Manager [NIRAS] and Defra ODA Hub to ensure a smooth transition for any projects affected.</p> <p>Ensure deadline for Change Requests to move project funds to later FYs is several months <i>before</i> award from next funding round, to ensure overprogramming and overspend does not happen.</p>	<p>Minor</p>
<p>Financial/Fiduciary</p>	<p>Risk of a project's funds being misappropriated for non-programme usage.</p> <p>Risk of poor financial management</p>	<p>Major</p>	<p>Possible</p>	<p>Major</p>	<p><i>Reduce:</i> Fund Manager [NIRAS] will manage and mitigate risk associated with the delivery partners, through enhanced due diligence, spot checks, reporting frameworks, audits and checks conducted prior to grant instalments being transferred.</p> <p>Disbursement practices enable close monitoring and the ability to halt expenditure, reducing the potential for misuse of funds.</p>	<p>Minor</p>

Reputational	<p>HMG invests in poor quality projects/implementers</p> <p>Risk of interventions going wrong/causing harm, or delivery partners acting in a way that causes reputational harm to HMG</p> <p>Risk of negative media coverage of unsuccessful projects and/or of projects in UKOTs with relatively high GDP</p>	Major	Possible	Major	<p><i>Reduce:</i> Delivery Partners competitively selected against rigorous technical and financial criteria with independent assessment will help ensure projects meet delivery, quality and strategic objectives.</p> <p>Reporting frameworks, due diligence and spot check conducted by the Fund Manager [NIRAS].</p> <p><i>Reduce:</i> Maintain, via the Fund Manager [NIRAS], close oversight and due diligence of portfolio, providing training and advice to delivery partners, requiring a robust safeguarding policy in place including systems to enable reporting and support whistle-blowers.</p> <p>Ongoing engagement and analysis to monitor negative media coverage, working with FCDO and Defra Comms and Media teams to ensure defensive lines are available.</p>	Minor
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Our understanding of risk continues to develop and strengthen with regular risk management and lesson learning. This has resulted in some minor changes to risks in the period but adjustments to the risk ratings are not recommended beyond the Delivery & Operational Risk.

Delivery & Operational

With extra funding, new funding windows and additional compliance functions, the workload involved in administering the Darwin Plus programme has grown. To respond, NIRAS continues to strengthen its staffing, including the recent addition of a communications expert and a Safeguarding Manager. Within Defra, recruiting enough staff to optimally oversee programme implementation remains challenging. At the time of writing, gaps in headcount remain.

Recommendations:

- Amend residual risk for Delivery and Operational to moderate by March 2024.
- Swap references to Covid with the broader phrase “natural disasters and pandemics” by March 2024.
- Add or amend items in risk assessment, as shown below, by March 2024.

Risk Type	Indicative High-Level Risks	Impact	Probability ⁶	Gross Risk	Mitigation	Residual Risk
Delivery	Capacity to effectively oversee a portfolio of often novel activities and deliver on programme objectives.	Major	Likely	Major	<i>Share: Develop resource capacity, supported by strong planning and oversight with regular review points, after-action-reviews, to identify pinch point and resources constraints. Further strengthened with clear Terms of Reference, comprehensive documentation of processes, manage vacancy rate and reduced complexity of funds.</i>	Minor
	Delays in implementation of Results Framework make it harder to tell a compelling story about the Darwin Plus' overall results and value for money	Major	Likely	Major	<i>Compare results from early reporting projects with what these projects' expected results, as an early indication of overall programme performance. Monitor fund-wide progress in achieving outputs, via project annual reports, as another early indicator of overall progress. Complement this with qualitative evidence, including case studies from selected projects.</i>	Moderate
Safeguarding	Risk of programme or partner staff doing harm (including but not limited to Human Rights, OSJA, Safeguarding SEAH), then failing to investigate, or not reporting such incidences.	Severe	Possible	Severe	<i>Reduce: Maintain, via the Fund Manager [NIRAS], close oversight and due diligence of activities across portfolio, providing training and advice to delivery partners, requiring a robust safeguarding policy in place including systems to enable reporting and support whistle-blowers.</i>	Moderate

⁶ Likelihood: Almost certain (>80%), Likely (>50%<80%), Possible (>20%<50%), Unlikely (>5%<20%), Rare (<5%)

E: PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT: DELIVERY, COMMERCIAL & FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE [1 - 1 ½ pages]

Overall delivery and financial management

Slightly fewer projects were awarded under the Main and Fellowships scheme under Round 11 than Round 10 (21 versus 24) but this is unsurprising as it coincided with Darwin Plus Local Round 1, which may have diverted some applications.

Scheme	Round 11	
	Total No. of grants	Lifetime Value
Main	13	£5,471,897
Fellowships	8	£316,649
Total	21	£5,788,546

Scheme	Round 1	
	Total No. of grants	Lifetime Value
Local	45	£1,460,019.00

Funding for Round 12 of Darwin Plus Main and Fellowships commenced in April 2024 and, at the time of writing (November 2023), has successfully attracted a large number of applications from stakeholders. Darwin Plus Local also attracted a large number of applications in Rounds 2 and 3, which will be reported on in the next Darwin Plus Annual Review.

Good progress has been made on improving the structure of the programme. In this reporting period, Darwin Plus has expanded to include a new funding scheme, Darwin Plus Local, which is aimed at building capacity. Preparations were also made for the introduction of Darwin Plus Strategic in April 2023 for fostering great innovation, ambition and collaboration in and between territories. In addition, a refreshed approach to communications has been put in place, with a new website developed.

International climate and nature commitments

Darwin Plus continues to align with and contribute to the UK's international climate and nature commitments and responsibilities, including the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Paris Agreement.

Darwin Plus Advisory Group (DPAG)

The DPAG offer independent technical specialist expertise on biodiversity in the UKOTs and the environmental threats the territories face, as well as challenges in project delivery, including but not restricted to project and financial management, safeguarding and GESI. It consists of a range of experts from government, academia, science and the private sector. The DPAG's role is:

- to assess grant applications against the published criteria, to agreed timelines and standards,
- to enable Defra to award funding to high-quality projects by making recommendations to ministers on applications for funding,

- to provide strategic advice, and
- to champion Darwin Plus.

The BCFs Expert Groups Handbook, which includes important information such as the Terms of Reference and Conflict of Interest policy and procedures, can be found on the Darwin Plus website under Advisory Group Resources <https://darwinplus.org.uk/resources/advisory-group-resources/>.

Project Mid-Term Reviews and field visits

Over the 2022-23 period, NIRAS commissioned three Mid-Term Reviews of Darwin Plus Projects, which included field site visits to provide an external perspective on their progress:

- *DPLUS121 - Strengthening Biosecurity to Protect Turks & Caicos' Iguana Islands - Turks and Caicos Islands*
The review concluded that the project was highly relevant, making good progress against most targets and well managed. It recommended strengthening engagement, planning beyond the end of the project and establishing a “biosecurity working group”. In addition, a recommendation was made to the Darwin Plus programme to consider commissioning a review of all biosecurity/invasive species projects to identify what works well and lessons learned.
- *DPLUS140 - Assessment and conservation of Cayman Islands' deep-water reefs and fishes - Cayman Islands*
The review concluded that the project was highly relevant and has made good progress. It recommended strengthening engagement and ensuring sufficient data collection to inform policy. In addition, recommendations were made to the Darwin Plus Programme to apply learning from this project for other similar projects, prioritising research for mesophotic coral ecosystems and other deep ecosystems, and to request the development of a Theory of Change in project applications.
- *DPLUS153 - Conserving Tropical Marine Ecosystems in the Turks and Caicos Islands through Science-based Fisheries Management - Turks and Caicos Islands*
The Review concluded that the project was relevant, mostly making good progress and is well managed. It made recommendations on the management of the project and to explore how fishers may be organised to support sustainability of project achievements. In addition, recommendations were made to the Darwin Plus Programme to request interim Outcome-level indicators in the application logframe guidance and to encourage/require all projects in a UKOT working on the same area to meet annually to share lessons and results.

Delivery and performance

Darwin Plus is delivered by a small Defra policy team and an external fund manager, NIRAS. In the 2022 Independent Evaluation of all three BCFs by Ecorys, Defra accepted a recommendation to increase its engagement with NIRAS to build a stronger working relationship, streamline process, align strategic direction and maximise learning. Defra has since adopted this recommendation, with Defra staff and NIRAS both reporting close and effective collaboration.

Following the competitive process, a multiyear contract (based on standard Defra Terms and Conditions) was awarded on the 30th March 2022 to NIRAS, and is available at www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk As such, this annual review covers the first year of the new contract.

NIRAS due diligence Delivery Partner Review was completed in 2022-23. The recommendations emerging from this Delivery Partner Review are tracked through a fund-level recommendation tracker which is reviewed at least quarterly.

The Performance Management Framework (PMF), below, is used to monitor, measure, and control NIRAS' performance of contract responsibilities.⁷ The PMF will be periodically reviewed, particularly when new capabilities are generated to monitor KPIs, or new workstreams are agreed with Defra.

The current PMF KPIs are summarised below along with a narrative to assess their status:

KPI 1: Financial Management is delivered to a high standard. (Met expectation)

- The new financial systems are established and operate smoothly. Financial management is delivered well, with project claims processed efficiently, and strengthened processing of change requests. Plans include new forecasting processes and a substantial review of the project level financial guidance and processes.

KPI 2: The funds are agile, responding to risks and opportunities to strengthen performance. (Met expectation)

- A new funding scheme has been introduced under Darwin Plus to better meet the needs of the UKOTs:
 - Darwin Plus Local, which has been introduced to support small scale environmental projects, with the aim of building capacity in-territory and contributing to local economies.
 - In addition, preparation have been made to introduce Darwin Plus Strategic in April 2023, which is intended for projects that can demonstrate greater ambition and/or collaboration, relative to projects being funded under the other Darwin Plus grant schemes.

KPI 3: Clear guidance and feedback enables the key stakeholders to put forward strong applications. (Met expectations)

- Guidance is annually reviewed by NIRAS and Defra to strengthen application quality, reflecting on feedback and lessons learnt from previous funding rounds and active delivery of projects. In-country organisations are putting forward strong applications, and applicants are reapplying with strong applications. Further work is required to strengthen the adoption and value of the indicators.

KPI 4: Independent expertise is efficiently targeted to identify the most transformational proposals. (Met expectations)

- Experts have been recruited to maintain the capability and capacity of the DPAG to assess proposals. Experts are matched to assess applications based on their skills and knowledge, whilst managing any conflicts of interests and availability constraints. The expert committee has been functioning effectively in providing advice on projects according to criteria established. From 2024, plans include new hiring to fill skills gaps around nature finance, market systems/private sector development and legislative reform.

KPI 5: Performance of projects is strengthened by adapting and responding to actions and recommendations arising from project reviews and feedback. (Met expectations)

- Project Annual Reports and Mid-Term Reviews are utilised to provide projects with recommendations to strengthen delivery, with lessons learned also being fed in to overarching guidance documents where appropriate. The BCF approach to reporting will be independently reviewed in 2023-24 to strengthen the value and efficiency of reporting.

KPI 6: Capability and capacity of national and local stakeholders enhanced. (Met expectations)

⁷ Close and effective collaboration between Defra and the fund manager (NIRAS) makes it harder to assess the performance of Defra and NIRAS separately. Some KPIs are partly within Defra's control.

- The Workstream Capability and Capacity is early in its delivery, with planning delays attributable to both Defra and NIRAS. NIRAS continues to develop and deliver high quality webinars, particularly related to the application cycle and grant start-up, with positive assessments by participants.

KPI 7: Evidence is utilised, and Best Practices are made available. (Met expectations)

- After initial delays, strong progress is being made if with the Workstream Building and Applying Evidence. New processes and systems have been developed, enabling a strong pipeline of prioritised deep-dives.

KPI 8: International Awareness and Understanding of the funds is strengthened. (Met expectations)

- Workstream 7: A communications strategy has been developed, with activities being delivered to further strengthen website performance and new products being focussed upon.

Recommendations:

- Continue to strengthen the 'Building and Applying Evidence' workplan, which covers the three BCFs, to support the generation, collation and sharing of evidence and best practice, based on robust analysis and evaluation of the portfolio and projects, to inform programme governance and wider decision making by stakeholders. The workstream has two main approaches:
 1. Synthesis of standardised project level data, which allows for data to be aggregated and summarised; and
 2. Deep-dive synthesis studies focusing on discrete learning questions.
- Further strengthen Darwin Plus communications to raise awareness and understanding of the programme through guidance and targeted communication activities, supporting a continuous improvement in the quality of applications received. To deliver, NIRAS will generate new content and seek to understand its impact with stakeholders.
- Improve the transparency of Darwin Plus' ODA spend by publishing relevant programme data on DevTracker.
- The rollout of the Standard Indicators and the data they generate will increase opportunities for building and applying evidence and sharing learning across all BCF projects. This greater capability for detailed analyses, such as deep-dives, will allow BCF teams to test their Theory of Change assumptions and hypotheses. Defra and NIRAS are investing more staff time in lesson learning, results, and evaluation, which is supporting this process.
- Work with NIRAS to further support and strengthen the capability of grantees to manage financial information to underpin successful project delivery and fund-level management systems.
- Strengthen membership of the DPAG through recruitment. Advert should call for stronger representation from the Global South. Recruitment exercise to be completed by April 2024.

Date of last narrative financial report	N/A	Date of last audited annual statement	N/A
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