

Annual Review Template

Title: Darwin Plus		
Programme Value £ (full life): up to £30m (current Full Business Case)		Review date: October 2024
Programme Code: DEA10153	Start date: April 2022	End date: March 2025 (current Full Business Case)

Summary of Programme Performance

Year	FY 22/23	FY 23/24						
Overall Output Score	A	A						
Risk Rating	Moderate	Moderate						

DevTracker Link to Business Case:	<a href="#">DevTracker Programme GB-GOV-7-DarwinPlus Documents (fcdo.gov.uk)</a>
DevTracker Link to results framework:	<a href="#">Darwin Plus Synthesis 20241751469197.xlsx</a>

A. SUMMARY AND OVERVIEW

A1. Description of programme

This Annual Review has been drafted by Defra with input from NIRAS. Performance data has been sourced from Darwin Plus project annual reviews submitted by grantees and consolidated to report against Standard Indicators feeding into the programme Results Framework. Data verification and validation has been carried out by NIRAS and external experts (where appropriate) according to a BCF validation protocol, with support provided by the Biodiversity Challenge Funds (BCFs) Analyst based at Defra. Throughout this document, “we” refers to Defra and NIRAS working in close partnership, plus JNCC for activities involving Darwin Plus Local only.

[Darwin Plus](#) is a competitive grants programme that funds projects to support the unique biodiversity and environments of the UK Overseas Territories (OTs)<sup>1</sup>. The programme is one of Defra’s three BCFs (the other two being Darwin Initiative and the Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund), having split out from the Darwin Initiative in 2012 to create a fund specifically for the OTs. Darwin Plus is the only UK Government programme that funds environmental projects across all fourteen OTs exclusively. Of the fourteen OTs, Montserrat, St Helena - including Tristan da Cunha, and the Pitcairn Islands are eligible for Official Development Assistance (ODA). Thus, Darwin Plus uses both ODA and non-ODA funding at a roughly 30/70 split respectively.

A note on Darwin Plus ODA Spend and Poverty Reduction

1.

This Annual Review covers the whole Darwin Plus programme and does not disaggregate data 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.** The OTs are still subject to the International Development (Gender Equality) Act 2014.

<sup>1</sup> The OTs are: Anguilla; Bermuda; British Antarctic Territory (BAT); British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT); British Virgin Islands; Cayman Islands; Falkland Islands; Gibraltar; Montserrat; Pitcairn, Henderson, Ducie and Oeno Islands; Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha; South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands; Turks and Caicos Islands; UK Sovereign Base Areas. Of these, Montserrat, St Helena - including Tristan da Cunha, and the Pitcairn Islands are eligible for Official Development Assistance (ODA).

**A note on Darwin Plus and Sovereignty of the British Indian Ocean Territory**

1. On 22 May 2025 the UK Government signed treaty to hand sovereignty of the Chagos Islands (British Indian Ocean Territory) to the Government of the Republic of Mauritius. Ratification expected in mid-2025.
2. This recent political development does not impact this Annual Review, which only covers programme activities during FY 2023/24. Future Darwin Plus Annual Reviews will take developments, and relevant changes to the programme, into account accordingly.

The UK government has a **legal obligation** to promote the wellbeing of its sovereign OTs under [Article 73 of the Charter of the United Nations](#). Each department is responsible for supporting the OTs in all policy areas for which they have responsibility for in England, hence why Defra upholds responsibility for supporting the OTs' biodiversity.

Collectively, the OTs host over [90% of known endemic \(unique\) British species](#), of which approximately [45.5% are threatened with extinction](#). As mostly remote, low-lying islands, the OTs are extremely vulnerable to the arrival of invasive non-native species and to the impacts of climate change. OT inhabitants are heavily dependent on their unique habitats and ecosystems for both their economies (e.g. supporting tourism and fisheries) and livelihoods (e.g. providing resilience to extreme events): therefore, to protect one is to safeguard the other.

Darwin Plus is Defra's primary offer of support for the OTs and is recognised by the OTs as an essential source of environment funding, both for their marine and terrestrial environments<sup>2</sup>. The four grant schemes to comprise Darwin Plus, as of November 2024, are summarised in **Table 1**.

**Table 1.** Summary of the four Darwin Plus funding schemes inviting applications, as of November 2024.

Scheme name	Budget	Project Duration	Aims
Darwin Plus Main	£50k-£1m*	1-3 years	Supporting environmental projects of benefit to the OTs.
Darwin Plus People & Skills (prev. Darwin Plus Fellowships)	Up to £100k	Up to 24 months	Supporting people to increase their knowledge and ability to protect their natural environments. Open to OT Nationals, long-term residents or those with a long-term relationship with an OT without a permanent resident population.
Darwin Plus Strategic	£1-3m	3-5 years	For larger-scale, longer-term projects able to drive ambitious outcomes in and between OTs.
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.

\* Upon the opening of Round 13, we lowered the minimum budget for Darwin Plus Main projects from £100k to £50k to close the budget gap between Darwin Plus Main and Darwin Plus Local.

**Programme headlines from 2023/24**

The programme has kept its pace of continuously delivering evidence-based improvements following from the major developments of 2022/23. This includes **substantial portfolio growth, significant programme changes** and the **finetuning** of features that were introduced in last year's review:

- In 2023, we restructured Darwin Plus from two to four grant schemes, including **new Darwin Plus Local and Darwin Plus Strategic schemes** tailored to better respond to OT needs and priorities.
- We **reviewed, refocused and rebranded the Darwin Plus Fellowships scheme to Darwin Plus People & Skills** following NIRAS' 2023 deep dive and an independent review of the Darwin Plus Fellowships scheme, led by select members of the Darwin Plus Advisory Group (DPAG). We launched these changes for Round 13 (opened for applications in April 2024).
- We saw the **start of 80 new Darwin Plus projects worth >£7.9million** (see Table 2), including:
  - 13 new projects from Round 11 of Darwin Plus Main, worth >£5million.
  - 8 new Fellowship projects, worth >£335k.
  - The first two tranches of Darwin Plus Local projects: 59 projects worth >£2million.

<sup>2</sup> [UK and Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council 2024: communiqué.](#)

The number of new projects has more than tripled from the previous year, and their total lifetime monetary value is >20% higher. This jump is attributed to the new Darwin Plus Local scheme, which accounted for 74% of new projects.

- In addition, we managed:
  - Round 12 of Darwin Plus Main and Fellowships (for projects starting in April 2024).
  - Rounds 2 and 3 of Darwin Plus Local (for projects starting in October 2023 and April 2024, respectively).
  - The first round of Darwin Plus Strategic. This new scheme received one application, which was successful and awarded >£2.5million over 4 years (project started April 2024).

Table 2: Number and value of Darwin Plus grants awarded since start of current Business Case.

Darwin Plus Funding Round	Number of projects funded					Value of projects funded		
	Main	Fellowships	Local	Strategic	Total	Non-ODA funds	ODA funds	Total
Round 10 (projects starting from April 2022)	20	3	N/A	N/A	23	£5,698,210.68	£758,941.32	£6,457,152.00
Round 11 (projects starting from April 2023)	13	8	59	N/A	80	£6,020,973.14	£1,903,696.17	£7,924,669.31
Round 12 (projects starting from April 2024)	14	3	60	1	78	£9,363,195.55	£901,217.83	£10,264,413.38

- We planned to inform applicants to Round 12 of their results in late 2023, but due to Defra's internal business planning processes, results were delayed until April 2024. We acknowledged the impact delays likely caused to project start dates and exercised more flexibility in encouraging applicants to submit budgetary change requests.
- We reviewed and revised the Darwin Plus Theory of Change and Logframe, which were first introduced in the 2022 Full Business Case. Adopting changes discussed at a workshop in summer 2024, we have also finetuned wording for the Standard Indicators, and Results Framework.

A2. Summary supporting narrative for the overall score in this review

A score of A has been allocated by Defra ODA Programme Board to this second Annual Review of the Darwin Plus programme for its high indicative performance and continuous improvement.

The available data suggests that most Output Indicators are meeting or exceeding their targets. Furthermore, we have significantly strengthened our capacity and approach to Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) and Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (SEAH) safeguarding, Capability and Capacity-Building, and Communications.

Progress against Output Indicators

In this reporting period, our ability to effectively measure progress against the newly introduced project report Standard Indicators is restricted by sample size: the new reporting system is still being rolled out and has only been mandatory for new projects since mid-2023. Despite this, the available data suggests that most Output Indicators are meeting or exceeding their targets (see Table 3).

Projects have made impressive progress, especially on the production and use of evidence to guide future biodiversity management and policies (as well as future Darwin Plus projects), and the capability and capacity of national and local stakeholders. Improvements on GESI disaggregation are still needed. Table 3 summarises Output scores by component. We will be able to draw more robust conclusions over the next two years as more projects implement the new reporting framework.



**Table 3:** Progress against Output Indicators

Output no.	Output title	Impact weighting	Progress	Output score
1	Evidence is produced which can be used to guide future biodiversity management and policies (as well as future Darwin Plus projects)	25%	5 Indicators exceeded milestone targets  1 Indicator missed milestone target	A+
2	Capability and capacity of national and local stakeholders are improved	25%	7 Indicators exceeded milestone targets  1 Indicator missed milestone target	A+
3	Policies and management techniques that promote sustainability are implemented	25%	4 Indicators exceeded milestone targets  2 Indicator missed milestone target	A
4	Programme management is good and adapts to strengthen the delivery of the challenge fund	25%	The programme team does not set milestones for application quality and annual/final report scores. However, sufficient high-quality applications were received, and average annual report and final report scores well within the range 1.20-2.25 indicate that the majority of programmes are on track to achieve their expected outcomes  1 Indicator missed milestone target	A+

Performance of Darwin Plus Local

We **introduced Darwin Plus Local** to the Darwin Plus programme in response to feedback from OT stakeholders, who expressed a need for **more accessible funding**. This new scheme has proven popular with applicants and was **responsible for the major uptick in projects observed in FY 2023/24, accounting for 74% of new projects awarded** (see **Section A1**). We launched the scheme in January 2023, with the first round of projects commencing the following April.

Darwin Plus Local complements our other schemes by supporting smaller-scale, shorter-term, locally-led<sup>3</sup> projects (<1 year), designed to build skilled capacity in grant management, and to contribute to local economies, where present. Uniquely, this scheme is open to individual applicants (for projects <£20k) as well as organisations (for projects <£50k). Its streamlined application and reporting processes are better suited to rapid-response projects that address arising challenges and urgent needs. This simplified approach also opens opportunities to individuals and smaller organisations, who often have the most practical experience and local expertise but limited capacity.

Defra commissioned a **Darwin Plus Local deep dive** in August 2024 to capture learning on performance and stakeholder feedback from early implementation of the scheme. Early results are very encouraging and indicate that the **outcomes from 87% of reporting projects that were awarded in FY 2023/24 met or exceeded expectations**. However, there was no (or very limited) gender disaggregation on “people” indicators, and the deep dive recommended that light touch specific guidance could improve reporting. We are already incorporating lessons from the deep dive into Darwin Plus Local planning and management.

Introduction of Darwin Plus Strategic

At the other end of the spectrum, we **introduced Darwin Plus Strategic** to the Darwin Plus programme for large-scale, long-term projects (worth £1-3m and lasting 3-5 years) designed to foster innovation and collaboration in and between OTs. We held the first Round of Darwin Plus Strategic in FY 2023/24 and **awarded a single project worth >£2.5m** to strengthen biosecurity across the Caribbean OTs, which started in April 2024.

Darwin Plus Fellowships Review and Revision

Defra commissioned a **deep dive and independent review of Darwin Plus Fellowships** in 2023 to identify ways of strengthening this scheme. In response to its findings, **we rebranded Darwin Plus**

<sup>3</sup> The Lead Organisation or individual applying **must be based in one of the OTs**. Where an OT has no permanent population, the applicant must demonstrate their long-term meaningful connection to that Territory.

**Fellowships to Darwin Plus People & Skills** and clarified its guidance packs to appeal to new applicants beyond academia. The onus of the scheme going ahead is on broader training, including educational, practical and professional development opportunities for OT nationals, long-term residents and (for the uninhabited OTs) those with a long-term relationship to an OT. The objective of the scheme remains to increase their knowledge and ability to meet long-term strategic outcomes for their natural environments. We opened applications for the rebranded scheme in April 2024.

Updates to project reporting templates

We review and update Darwin Plus reporting templates annually. Key changes this year included:

- Building on recommendations from the **2023 deep dive on BCFs Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Systems and Reporting**, we:
  - Revised and simplified the approach to reporting against the Logframe.
  - Updated the scoring descriptors.
  - Added an additional score to better disentangle between achievement of results vs reporting quality and evidence provision.
  - Revised and simplified the Standard Indicator approach.
- We developed the question on transformational change in the Annual Report template to better break down the contributing factors and help with project and reviewer assessment.

In addition, we developed an escalation process to help monitor overall project management and performance, including tracking whether projects are meeting their reporting deadlines. By applying the escalation process we have found that projects are better at staying in touch, keeping to deadlines and providing updates where there are delays.

Capability and Capacity-Building

Between April 2023 and July 2024 NIRAS **delivered 9 online workshops** relevant to Darwin Plus. These workshops were held at various points in the lifecycle of the grants from the pre-application stage through to the launch of new projects. Topics included how to apply for grants, and financial, administrative and technical reporting.

NIRAS **recruited a Capability and Capacity-Building Lead** in May 2023 to help refine and drive forward this workstream, and to manage the coordination and production of required materials. NIRAS and Defra worked closely to develop a **Capability and Capacity-Building Strategy for 2024-25**. This included hosting an in-person workshop to discuss requirements and priorities for this workstream, which are:

1. **Pre-application** - aiming to improve the quality of applications through Capability and Capacity support during design phase, specifically tailored for smaller organisations and those with language and cultural barriers. The key focus for 2024-25 is to provide initial and clear support for the following:
  - a. Strong project design and logic, including equitable partnership co-design in country
  - b. Application writing, including introducing and explaining complex concepts (e.g. GESI and safeguarding).
  - c. Budget building
  - d. Logframe building
  - e. Risk management, including safeguarding
2. **Post award** –ensuring projects that have received funding are being provided with all the tools they require to efficiently and effectively implement and manage their projects to deliver impact across the BCFs portfolio, meeting our programme level goals. The key focus here is to provide targeted technical assistance and support materials on the following areas:
  - a. Finance
  - b. MEL and reporting
  - c. Risk and adaptive management
  - d. Programme management

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)

The status of Darwin Plus-relevant deep dives, as of July 2024, is summarised in **Table 4**. Published deep dives are available on the Darwin Plus [website](#).

**Table 4: Status of Darwin Plus-relevant deep dives, as of July 2024. Deep dives referenced elsewhere in this Review are in **bold**.**

Round	Ref No.	Deep dive study	Comments on progress (as at end July 2024)
Round 1	DD23-01	Application scores and project performance	Completed Dec 23
	<b>DD23-02</b>	<b>Review of BCFs MEL reporting systems including Standard Indicators</b>	Completed Oct 23
	<b>DD23-03</b>	<b>Review of Darwin Plus Fellowships</b>	Completed May 23
	<b>DD23-04</b>	<b>GESI in the BCFs</b>	Completed Jun 23
	DD23-06	Improving evaluation of impacts	Completed Sept 23
	DD23-07	Process for conducting legacy evaluations	Completed Apr 23
	DD23-08	Evidence use and generation	Completed Apr 23
Round 2	DD23-09	Model to Link researchers / independent evaluators with BCF projects	Draft report complete – under discussion
	DD23-10	Determining potential for scaling, replication and transformational change	Study underway
	DD23-11	Opportunities for use of AI and Large Language Models (LLMs) to improve the efficiency of synthesis processes	Completed Feb 24
	<b>DD23-12</b>	<b>Develop a Value for Money assessment approach for the BCF portfolios.</b>	Study underway
	<b>DD23-13</b>	<b>Sustainability in the BCFs / Legacy continuation</b>	ToR being drafted
	DD23-15	Evaluation of livelihoods programming in BCF projects	Completed Jun 24
Round 3	DD24-02	Developing indicators and methods to facilitate reporting in the BCFs	Study underway
	<b>DD24-03</b>	<b>Review of Darwin Plus Local</b>	Study underway

Darwin Plus Advisory Group (DPAG) recruitment

We undertook a recruitment exercise for all BCF expert groups between January and April 2024. In our DPAG recruitment guidance, we developed criteria with the aim of strengthening representation from those with experience living and/or working in the OTs, and with a good understanding or environmental issues and challenges facing the OTs and/or other small islands or Territories. Through this particular campaign, we did not attract any relevant talent. The outcome of the recruitment drive was the appointment of one new member and the reappointment of one existing member for another term. The gender balance of the DPAG, including ex-officio members, has shifted from 7:7 male:female to 6:8 male:female. More effort will be made in future years to attract talent from the OTs.

GESI and SEAH Safeguarding

We achieved the following key milestones during April 2023 – Jul 2024:

- **NIRAS recruited a BCFs Safeguarding Manager** in December 2023 to review the safeguarding approach and ensure adherence to HMG Safeguarding Strategy.
- We developed a **bespoke application assessment process** in line with the new Common Approach to SEAH (CAPSEAH) Minimum Recommended Actions. This has been applied to new projects, ensuring adequate feedback and support was given to projects to meet minimum standards for Protection from SEAH (PSEAH). This approach is iterative and will be followed by bespoke products and education material on PSEAH.
- **We have updated guidance and application forms to ensure SEAH requirements are clear**, and applicants are given resources to enhance their safeguarding/SEAH approach. Safeguarding information is now included in webinars and applicants/grantees are encouraged to approach NIRAS for individual advice and guidance via the Helpdesk. The Safeguarding manager also reviews project Half Year Reports and Annual Reports to check progress on projects' procedures.
- **We completed and published the deep dive on GESI in the BCFs**, which collected and synthesised evidence and lessons of incorporating GESI.
- **New reporting templates introduced in 2023 included:**
  - **Gender indicators for the first time**, and projects are also expected to report indicators disaggregated by gender where possible and to describe how their project

- has proactively contributed to ensuring individuals achieve equitable outcomes and how they have engaged participants in a meaningful way.
- **A new rubric for project self-assessment** and reviewer assessment against the GESI scale.
- **A refined the Annual Report template question on safeguarding.**
- **We launched the BCFs GESI Strategy and 5-year Action Plan in January 2024**, outlining a minimum standard of GESI Sensitive for all projects and applicants.

The three BCFs have a GESI focal point (a member of the NIRAS fund administrator team) who is responsible for the overall management and implementation of the GESI Strategy and 5 Year Action Plan. We further draw on external expertise where required in conducting technical assessments, providing recommendations and assisting with the development of resources to support applicants, projects and our expert groups with GESI considerations.

Progress on key recommendations from FY 2022/23 Annual Review

- **Publish a review on Darwin Plus Local**  
Defra commissioned NIRAS to carry out a Darwin Plus Local deep dive in August 2024 to capture learning from early implementation of the scheme (as described above). NIRAS have conducted the deep-dive, and we are already incorporating lessons into Darwin Plus Local planning and management.
- **Consolidate and accelerate activities to strengthen the delivery and ambition of workstream 5: Building and Applying Evidence**  
We have made good progress introducing systems and approaches to manage this workstream, with new resources available. A new workstream 5 workplan is in place. We have captured experience from applying the new Standard Indicators (from grantees and the fund manager) and made minor adjustments accordingly to Standard Indicator wording, the Results Framework and Logframe and Theory of Change structure. We published Version 2.0 of the Standard Indicators, linked to the fund-level Results Framework and Logframes, during this reporting period. The Indicator Menu was restructured following feedback from applicants and grantees and the recommendations of deep dives commissioned during the 2022/23 reporting period. We also published an interactive Indicator Library, accessible to all through a web link.

We have developed and applied methodologies to determine fund level annual milestones and longer-term targets. We are developing methodologies to support Indicator measurement; completion is expected early 2025. Defra commissioned eight deep dives during this reporting period, with recommendations mainstreamed into processes through updates to application and reporting templates, guidance notes, GESI and communications strategies and planned engagements. We have strengthened guidance and support mechanisms to secure annually disaggregated results (especially on gender) for relevant Indicators, but uptake on disaggregated reporting has been lower than hoped for.

- **Strengthen capacity to provide assurance and support to meet ODA obligations including strengthened risk management, safeguarding (human rights, and SEAH) and transparency:**  
NIRAS recruited a Safeguarding Manager for the three BCFs in December 2023. This person is ensuring that risks associated with Health, Safety and Security, as well as SEAH, have been addressed and mitigated appropriately.
- **Improve Darwin Plus communications and outreach from FY23/24.**  
We achieved the following key milestones during April 2023 – Jul 2024:
  - NIRAS recruited a **Communications and Workshop Lead** in May 2023 to support increased ambition for this workstream.
  - We developed and implemented a comprehensive **BCFs Communications Strategy**.
  - We created an integrated workplan that incorporates outreach, capability and capacity building activities (e.g. editing recorded workshop videos / creating a web page for every workshop including recordings and supporting materials).
  - NIRAS redesigned, developed and launched specific websites for each BCF to create user-centric information hubs. These now work in tandem with a BCFs landing page website that links to each fund's website.
  - We developed **external Darwin Plus branding guidelines** for project publicity and created an online resource page, as well as **internal branding guidelines**, with branded templates (website, social media, Mailchimp, InDesign info notes, Word, PowerPoint, Outlook).

- NIRAS created trackers for social media platforms, public relations and website analytics<sup>4</sup>.
- NIRAS launched specific newsletters for each BCF that are sent to each fund's master email list. The newsletters include a blurb and link for each article, helping to drive traffic towards the fund website.
- **Develop and create cloud-based database to securely hold and make accessible project data.**  
The first phase of building the database's "backstage" functions (i.e. rear-end development) was completed by August 2024. Piloting, testing and further development will take place in late 2024 – 2025. The public database is expected to be ready for new projects to use by April 2025 (in line with original expectations). The comprehensive dashboard will allow users to export and filter project data (including financial data), making it quicker and easier to answer queries about the portfolio than with the website alone, which doesn't have an export function. We expect this database will be helpful allowing a wide variety of users to independently access project data, including Defra, across wider HMG, other funders, prospective applicants, eNGOs, researchers, journalists, etc.

**A3. Major lessons and recommendations for the year ahead**

Major lessons and recommendations for the year ahead are summarised in Table 5 below.

**Table 5: Major lessons and recommendations for the year ahead.**

<b>Project reporting</b>
<b>Review Standard Indicator milestones on an annual basis as new projects are approved.</b>
<b>Support grantees to increase disaggregation of data (e.g. by gender).</b> This includes improvements to the process of reporting, collecting, storing, managing, and reporting on disaggregated data during the data synthesis process. NIRAS published revised guidance in April 2024, and the effect of that will be seen in the data we receive April 2025, in time for next Annual Review.
<b>Deep dives and evaluation</b>
<b>Adjust deep dive ambition and finalise planned deep dives.</b> Given the challenges of conducting all planned deep dives this year, we will adjust ambition on the number of deep dives from 12 to 10.
<b>Finalise the agreement and associated fund manager resourcing needs for the expanded workstream 5.</b> This includes revising the total number of deep dives per year (currently 12) downwards (recommended 10 per year) and resources needed to support improved impact evaluation.
<b>When planning deep dive studies, NIRAS to consider the full range of time needed for dissemination of findings through C&amp;C and Comms, as well as process changes (e.g. updating text in templates) based on recommendations at the start of each deep dive.</b> NIRAS to add estimated level of effort for this to Terms of Reference.
<b>Finalise plans for the BCF evaluation.</b> The Terms of Reference should be ready by January 2025, and the evaluation will be started thereafter
<b>DPAG</b>
<b>The joint Expert Group recruitment across the three BCFs via Flexi-Grant was successful and this approach should be used in future recruitments rounds</b>

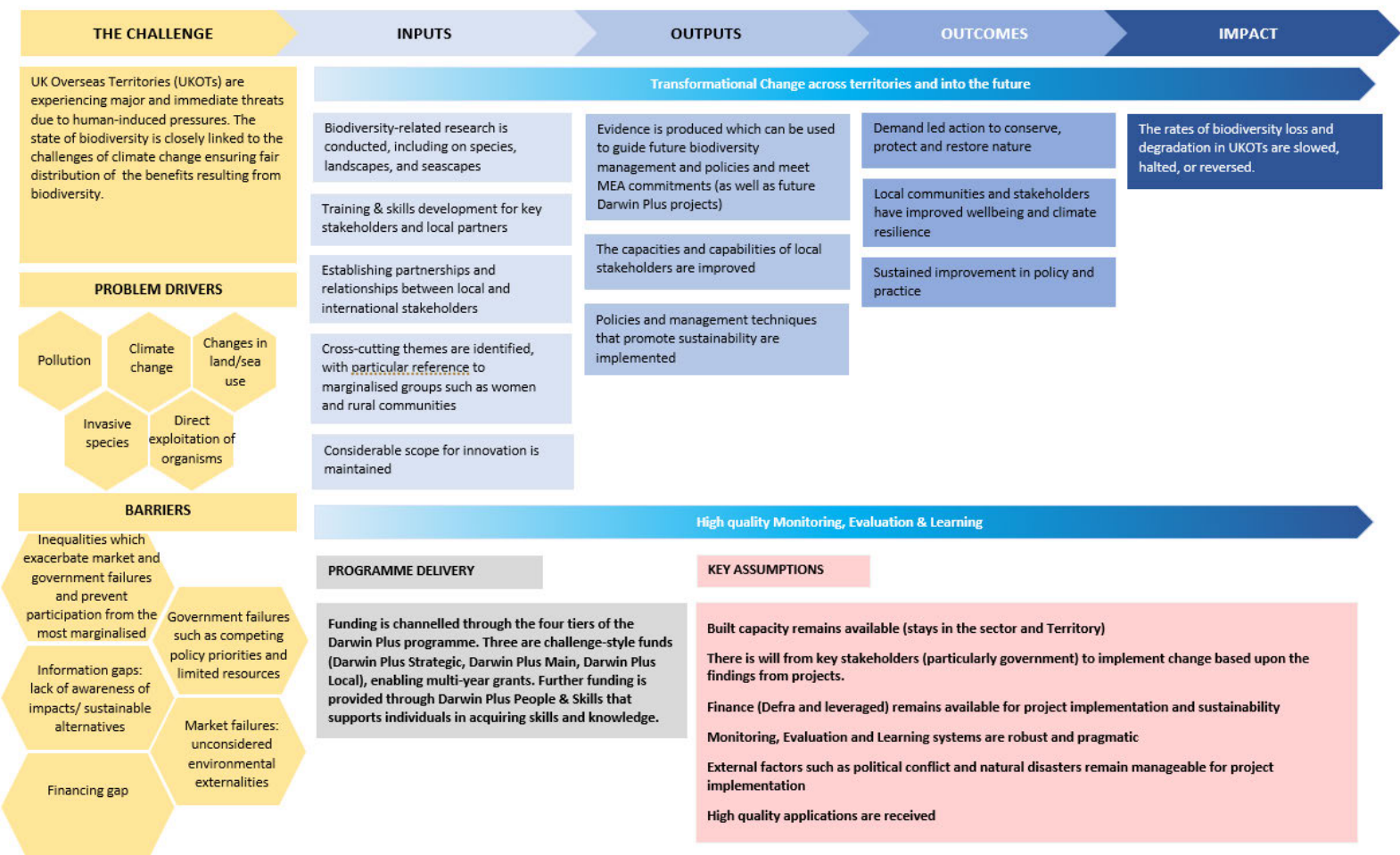
<sup>4</sup> Please note that we don't disaggregate our target audience by GESI characteristics.



B: THEORY OF CHANGE AND PROGRESS TOWARDS OUTCOMES

B1. Summarise the programme's theory of change, including any changes to outcome and impact Indicators from the original business case.

Figure 1: Darwin Plus Theory of Change and narrative



Theory of Change narrative

**IF** evidence is produced which can be used to guide future biodiversity management and policies **AND** the capacities and capabilities of local stakeholders are improved **AND** policies and management techniques that promote sustainability are implemented, **THEN** this will result in demand led action to conserve, protect and restore nature **AND** an improvement in wellbeing across diverse local communities and stakeholders **AND** sustained improvement in policy and practice **BECAUSE** the state of biodiversity is closely linked to the wellbeing of communities who rely on biological resources and who can be effective stewards of biodiversity when empowered with policy and support.

**Output Assumptions:**

- Built capacity remains available (stays in the sector and Territory)
- There is will from key stakeholders (particularly government) to implement change based upon the findings from projects
- Finance available is appropriately managed, converts outputs into outcomes (ODA /non-ODA and co-financing), and is sufficient for both implementation and sustainability of outcomes
- Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning systems are robust and pragmatic
- External factors such as political conflict and natural disasters remain manageable for project
- High quality applications are received
- The barriers are proven to be true and can be addressed; no significant unforeseen barriers are identified.
- Stakeholders, communities, enterprises, local and national government bodies, non-governmental organisations, and academics are engaged early and appropriately.
- ODA eligible UKOTs do not graduate from ODA status during the project's lifetime
- Delivery partners' capability, stability, and professionalism is appropriate and does not negatively affect project activities.

We made some minor adjustments to the Darwin Plus Theory of Change and Logframe following a workshop in mid-2024, and a subsequent GESI review in early 2025, although key assumptions have held during the reporting period. As a result, the Theory of Change in **Figure 1** above is slightly different to that developed for the 2022 Darwin Plus Business Case. These adjustments do not represent a material change to programme design. Minor adjustments:

- We have adjusted Indicators under 'Outcome Indicator 2.1: Number of people with improved or protected i) livelihoods (DEFRA Key Performance Indicator (KPI)), ii) disaster/ climate resilience' to better capture progress under this Outcome Indicator, and to change the unit of measurement from households to people.
- We have added a new 'Outcome Indicator 2.2: Gender and social inclusion is advanced throughout the fund' to 'Outcome 2: Local communities and stakeholders have improved wellbeing and climate resilience'
- We have made light modifications to wording and associated guidance to increase clarity.

Reporting on Impact, Output and Outcome Indicators in this Logframe continues to be supported by Standard Indicators, which we introduced in 2023 as part of a new reporting framework implemented across the BCFs. Disaggregation of results facilitates understanding of whether results vary according to age, sex, taxonomic groups and other relevant variables.

**B2. Describe where the programme is on/off track to contribute to the expected outcomes and impact. What action is planned in the year ahead?**

Only projects that started in 2023 or after are required to report using the Standard Indicators, so while this requirement is still being rolled out the data available is not comprehensive<sup>5</sup>. This under-reporting means it is not possible to score progress across the full suite of live and completed projects. Reporting will become more comprehensive and reliable over the following two years as all new projects implement the new system and will allow for better aggregation of information across all Darwin Plus (and indeed BCF projects) and hence a fuller understanding of achievements.

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<sup>5</sup> Prior to 2023, each project had its own Indicators used to assess results and impact, but these were not standardized across the Fund.

Results detailed here and in Section C come from 92 projects (approximate total value £14,437,103, plus £2,841,801 planned matched funding and £476,674 mobilised funding). This 92 includes only those projects that have submitted an annual report and reported against the Standard Indicators (often voluntarily). This is out of a total active portfolio of 68 projects.

The Theory of Change explains the overall intended impact of Darwin Plus: rates of biodiversity loss and degradation in the OTs are slowed, halted or reversed. We have selected 4 potential impact Indicators to measure progress in this respect:

- 1. Status of OT threatened endemic species (Indicator currently being developed with JNCC).
- 2. Extent and condition of terrestrial and marine protected areas in the OTs (Indicator currently being developed with JNCC).
- 3. National Biodiversity Strategies and Action plans.
- 4. Transformational change (methodology being developed)

We have not assessed progress towards achieving overall impact because methodologies for measuring progress on potential Impact Indicators 3 and 4 have not yet been finalised. A deep dive is underway to determine whether the third Indicator on national biodiversity strategy and action plans is appropriate, and if so to develop a methodology to assess progress. Another deep dive is underway to develop a methodology for calculating transformational change. These deep dives will be finalised in 2025 and emerging methodologies will be applied.

Further progress has been made towards measuring potential impact Indicators 1 and 2, which are still under development. As explained in the previous Annual Review, these align with the K3 and K4 International Outcome Indicators laid out in Defra’s 25 Year Environment Plan, and Defra has commissioned JNCC to monitor and report against K3 and K4:

- **K3: Status of endemic and globally threatened species in the UK Overseas Territories.**  
In May 2023, JNCC published [interim report 739](#) against this Indicator. JNCC are currently working to working to produce a full publication of the K3 Indicator and create a species database for the OTs that can be used to assess the threatened status of endemic species.
- **K4: Extent and condition of terrestrial and marine protected areas in the UK Overseas Territories.**  
In May 2023, JNCC published interim report 735 against this Indicator, which at the time of writing has been superseded by [interim report 760](#), published in June 2024. This latest iteration includes protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) established to the end of 2023 and provides technical information to accompany interim Indicator K4 on the [Outcome Indicator Framework dashboard](#).

Good progress has been made at outcome level, especially on hectares of habitat under sustainable management practices (1,167 ha) and number of people whose disaster/climate resilience has been improved (9,800 people). Progress on all Outcome Indicators (for which data is available) far outstripped milestones.

**Table 6:** Progress on Darwin Plus Outcome Indicators

Overall Indicator(s)	Relevant Indicator(s) and associated results			
	Indicator(s)	Milestone(s) for this review	Progress (incl. disaggregation)	Overall progress (over 2 years)
<b>Outcome 1: Demand led action to conserve, protect and restore nature</b>				
Outcome Indicator 1.1: Area under Ecological Management (ha) (DEFRA/ International Climate Finance (ICF) KPI 17)	Hectares of habitat under sustainable management practices	208 ha	1,167 ha	1,193
<b>Outcome 2: Local communities and stakeholders have improved wellbeing and climate resilience</b>				
Outcome Indicator 2.1: Number of people with improved or protected i) livelihoods (DEFRA	Number of people with enhanced livelihoods	New Indicator. Potential to report in 2024/25 if projects adopt		
	Number of people with enhanced wellbeing	New Indicator. Potential to report in 2024/25 if projects adopt		

Overall Indicator(s)	Relevant Indicator(s) and associated results			
	Indicator(s)	Milestone(s) for this review	Progress (incl. disaggregation)	Overall progress (over 2 years)
KPI), ii) disaster/ climate resilience (ICF KPI 1; ICF KPI 4),	Number of people whose disaster/climate resilience has been improved	0 people	9,800 people	9,800 people
	Value of ecosystem services generated or protected	0 people	0 (no projects reporting)	
Outcome Indicator 2.2: Gender equality and social inclusion is advanced throughout the fund	Proportion of projects assessed to be at minimum GESI-sensitive	50%	New Indicator	
	Proportion of people with enhanced livelihoods and wellbeing who are women	50%	0 (no projects reporting)	
	Proportion of people whose climate and disaster-resilience has been improved who are women	50%	0 (no projects reporting disaggregated results)	
<b>Outcome 3: Sustained improvement in policy and practice</b>				
Outcome Indicator 3.1: 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 policy	3 policies	3 policies
Outcome Indicator 3.2: Finance mobilised for new activities building on evidence, best practice and projects	Projects in their final year of funding. Sourced from Final Reports.	New indicator. Target not set for 2023/24.	£98,530	£98,530

A deep dive is underway to develop methodologies for Outcome Indicators where Standard Indicators are absent or require more detailed guidance (expect to be finalised in 2025). These methodologies will align with a Defra-wide process to develop methodologies for Defra International and International Climate Finance Indicators across Defra’s ODA portfolio. Disaggregated reporting on Standard Indicators has not been strong enough to report meaningful results in the table above. More efforts to secure disaggregated results from grantees will also be needed in 2025.

A different method of assessing progress also supports the ‘A’ rating given here. NIRAS assesses the progress of all ongoing Darwin Plus projects on a 1-5 scale (1 means ‘outcomes likely to be completely achieved’; 5 means ‘outcomes unlikely to be achieved’). Average annual performance scores are well within the range of 1.00-2.5, which indicates that most programmes are on track to achieve their expected objectives.

**There remains an evidence gap on the longer-term outcomes and impacts of Darwin Plus projects.** We have plans to plug this evidence gap across our schemes and better understand and quantify the longer-term impacts of Darwin Plus projects. These include the **deep dive on sustainability in the BCFs** (underway at the time of writing).

In addition, an **independent evaluation of the BCFs is planned for 2025** (mid-term results expected in 2026 and completion in 2028/2029). The evaluation aims to assess the relevance, performance, Value for Money and sustainability of the BCFs. The evaluation will go beyond the monitoring of outputs to identify the mechanisms through which change takes place; and assess the likelihood of long-term benefits being sustained. The evaluation will have two main purposes:



1. Learning: Lessons learnt on what works to tackle biodiversity loss in the OTs will drive improvements to Darwin Plus and broader UK Government biodiversity programming and strengthen the wider conservation evidence base. The evidence will be used as a learning tool for planning and implementing Darwin Plus and other programmes.
2. Accountability: Darwin Plus is a significant investment of public funds and will need to demonstrate evaluation evidence in any future Spending Review bids to HM Treasury.

Project case studies

In addition to Standard Indicators, project reports and communications with grantees provide a wealth of evidence of impact, as well as lessons learned. Darwin Plus stories are shared through a **dedicated Darwin Plus newsletter and News page** on the website. Over 2023-24, the Darwin Plus News page published **8 engaging articles written by grantees** that present the stories behind individual Darwin Plus projects to a lay audience.

A selection of further case studies of projects are summarised in **Annex 1** based on information in their reports. The underway Darwin Plus Local deep dive is also compiling case studies of strong projects and valuable lesson learning examples.

**B3. Justify whether the programme should continue, based on its own merits and in the context of the wider portfolio**

The Darwin Plus programme should continue because:

1. The OTs host around 94% of known endemic British species<sup>6</sup> and the UK Government has a moral and constitutional obligation to support the OTs to protect these unique environments;
2. It has a unique role within Defra as a dedicated funding source for biodiversity in the OTs;
3. It has demonstrated positive results (outcomes and outputs) in the OTs, as shown in this review and the [Ecorys report](#) referenced in [last year's review](#);
4. The Fund has made important contributions to a number of Defra International and ICF Indicators.
5. The new Darwin Plus Local scheme has been greatly welcomed by the OTs and is performing strongly.

Results from the early stage of rolling out Standard Indicators show that most Output Indicators are meeting or exceeding their planned milestones, and all Outcome Indicators for which we have data are exceeding their planned milestones. We are developing methodologies to better measure Outcomes and Impact Indicators, which we will introduce in 2024. We are continuously optimising Fund Indicators and guidance based on feedback from applicants and grantees.

The new Standard Indicators and associated reporting framework integrate Defra's ODA Key Performance Indicators and International Climate Finance Indicators. This has facilitated results aggregation and reporting at these two levels (in addition to the Fund and the BCF level). As the table above shows, the Fund has made important contributions to a number of Defra International and ICF Indicators, most notably hectares of habitat under sustainable management practices, and number of people whose disaster/climate resilience has been improved.

Feedback from respondents secured under 2024 Darwin Plus Local deep dive has also been positive. Overall, respondents felt that the scheme fits well with the capacity of smaller organisations and individuals, with simpler reporting requirements and a more focused, less burdensome administrative process. Darwin Plus Local supports smaller projects that can be completed within shorter time frames and with less funding. The scheme is valued for allowing projects that are closely aligned with the needs and priorities of local communities. It is considered more inclusive, especially for small, hands-on projects and citizen scientists, and is seen as accessible to those based within the territories, leading to a lasting legacy in terms of capacity building and relevance to local priorities.

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<sup>6</sup> 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

C1. Briefly describe the output’s activities, and provide supporting narrative for the score.

Output Title	Evidence is produced which can be used to guide future biodiversity management and policies (as well as future Darwin Plus projects)		
Output number:	1	Output Score:	A+
Impact weighting (%):	25%	Weighting revised since last AR?	Yes (down, as 1 more Output Indicator added)

Table 7. Progress against output: Evidence is produced which can be used to guide future biodiversity management and policies (as well as future Darwin Plus projects).

Overall Indicator(s)	Relevant Indicator(s) and associated results			
	Indicator(s)	Milestone(s) for this review <sup>7</sup>	Progress	Overall progress (over 2 years)
Indicator 1.1: Number of best practice guides and knowledge products developed, published and endorsed	Number of best practice guides and knowledge products published and endorsed	9	70	108
Indicator 1.2: Number of assessments conducted and published	Number of new conservation or species stock assessments published	10 species stock assessments published	165 species stock assessments published	165
	New assessments of habitat conservation action needs published	1 assessment	7 assessments	8
	New assessments of community use of biodiversity resources published	1 assessment	3 assessments	4
	Number of records added to accessible databases	687 records	4 records	4
Indicator 1.3: 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 projects	11 projects	20

Excellent progress has been made during the reporting period under this Output, particularly on the number of new conservation or species stock assessments published. Only 4 out of an anticipated 687 records were added to accessible databases, but this was because of the way milestones are calculated rather a missed target (one project - DPLUS-155 - reported 3000 records added to a database in the previous reporting period, which made up 100% of the total for 2022/23, but inflated

<sup>7</sup> As with all milestones in Section C output tables, because projects don’t estimate plans/targets each year of operation, milestones here are based on aggregated fund level project plans (speculated during project design phases and approved by the DPAG and Programme Board to ensure VfM), with an adjustment made for fund level expenditure and project duration. Confidence in ‘milestones’ was low last year due to the under-reporting expected during this early stage in the roll-out of Standard Indicators and the associated reporting framework and the optional nature of reporting. Confidence is higher this year, as the number of reporting projects increases, but reporting still does not capture all funded projects.

the milestone used for the current reporting year).We note that **some indicator milestones are being exceeded by a large degree this year across all output tables**. This reflects well on our selection process and expert committee as it indicates that good **projects that over-deliver on their planned ambitions** are being picked. We have **added a recommendation to review these indicators** accordingly for the next Annual Review.

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

We have added ‘Number of records added to accessible databases’ as an Indicator under ‘Indicator 1.2: Number of assessments conducted and published’.

**C3. Progress on recommendations from the previous AR (if completed), lessons learned this year and recommendations for the year ahead**

Progress on recommendations from previous review:

- **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:**  
We have met this recommendation. A July 2024 workshop on the Theory of Change, Logframe and Results Framework, alongside feedback from grantees and the Fund Manager on experience from using the Standard Indicators and associated Results Framework over the past year, informed refinements. We have updated associated guidance for grantees accordingly, and improved reporting against Outcome and Output Indicators. We initially drafted the Darwin Plus Logframe to align with the Darwin Initiative Logframe, but is now more Darwin Plus specific.
- **Improve the process for determining targets and milestones for Indicators:**  
We have met this recommendation. We have developed and applied methodologies to determine fund level annual milestones and longer-term targets. We note that some indicator milestones are being exceeded by a large degree. We will review milestones annually as new projects come into the Darwin Plus pipeline.
- **Efforts to secure disaggregated results (especially on gender) should continue, alongside a related Indicator refresh.**  
Progress on this is mixed. The new Standard Indicators and Results Framework support disaggregated reporting and are being rolled-out. We have refreshed Indicators to support greater social inclusion and gender related disaggregation. Disaggregated reporting on people Indicators by grantees, however, remains lower than hoped.
- **Develop methodologies for Indicators where they are missing by the end of 2024.**  
A deep dive on this is underway but has not yet been finalised.
- **Continue to strengthen the ‘Building and Applying Evidence’ workplan (workstream 5), which covers the three BCFs.**  
Progress is strong. We have developed and adopted an updated workplan, synthesis of standardised project level data continues to improve as more projects adopt and report on Standard Indicators, and deep dive studies are providing lessons to improve fund management. We have actively shared learning from this workstream with other relevant Defra programmes.

Recommendations for the year ahead:

- See section A3

**C1. Briefly describe the output’s activities and provide supporting narrative for the score.**

Output Title	Capability and capacity of national and local stakeholders are improved		
Output number:	2	Output Score:	A+
Impact weighting (%):	25%	Weighting revised since last AR?	Yes (down, as 1 more Output Indicator added)

**Table 8.** Progress against output: Capability and capacity of national and local stakeholders are improved

Overall Indicator(s)	Relevant Indicator(s) and associated results			
	Indicator(s)	Milestone(s) for this review	Progress	Overall progress (over 2 years)
Indicator 2.1: Number of people from key local and national stakeholders receiving training/ new skills (ICF technical assistance KPI 2)	Number of people from key national and local stakeholders completing structured and relevant training	240 people	494 people (of whom 37 women; remainder unstated)	1,096
	Number of secondments or placements completed by individuals of key local and national stakeholders	1 secondment	5 secondments (of whom: 1 woman; remainder unstated)	5
	Number of people reporting that they are applying new capabilities (skills and knowledge) 6 (or more) months after training.	17 people	23 people (of whom: 12 women; remainder unstated)	151
	Number of trainers trained reporting to have delivered further training by the end of the project	2 trainers	2 trainers	9
Indicator 2.2: Number of key local and national organisations with improved capability and capacity as a result of the project	Number of local/national organisations with improved capability and capacity as a result of project	12 local / national organisations	81 local / national organisations	113
Indicator 2.3: Number of people participating in community events and activities	Number of people participating in community events and activities	New Indicator. Potential to report in 2024/25 if projects adopt		
Indicator 2.4: Evidence and lessons learnt are shared and made accessible	Analytics for funded project-specific social media posts	New Indicator. Potential to report in 2024/25 if projects adopt		
	Number of webinar attendees	241 attendees	61 attendees	
	Number of media-related activities	12 activities	66 activities	
	Number of decision-makers attending briefing events	9 decision-makers	241 decision-makers	

Progress on this Output is excellent, particularly the number of people from key local and national stakeholders receiving training/ new skills, and the number of key local and national organisations with improved capability and capacity as a result of the project. Progress far outstripped milestones on many Indicators.

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

We have added new Indicators under ‘Indicator 2.3: Number of people participating in community events and activities’ and ‘Indicator 2.4: Evidence and lessons learnt are shared and made



accessible' to this Output to better capture the roles that events, webinars and social media play in building the capability and capacity of national and local stakeholders.

**C3. Progress on recommendations from the previous AR (if completed), lessons learned this year and recommendations for the year ahead**

Recommendations for the year ahead:

- See section A3

**C1. Briefly describe the output’s activities and provide supporting narrative for the score.**

<b>Output Title</b>	<b>Policies and management techniques that promote sustainability are implemented</b>		
<b>Output number:</b>	3	<b>Output Score:</b>	A
<b>Impact weighting (%)</b>	25%	<b>Weighting revised since last AR?</b>	Yes (down, as 1 more Output Indicator added)

**Table 9.** Progress against output: Policies and management techniques that promote sustainability are implemented

<b>Overall Indicator(s)</b>	<b>Relevant Indicator(s) and associated results</b>			
	<b>Indicator(s)</b>	<b>Milestone(s) for this review</b>	<b>Progress</b>	<b>Overall progress (over 2 years)</b>
Indicator 3.1: 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 habitat management plans	52 habitat management plans	59
	Number of new/improved species management plans available and endorsed	4 species management plans	3 species management plans	4
	Number of new/improved community management plans available and endorsed	3 community management plans	0	10
	Number of new/improved sustainable livelihoods/ poverty reduction management plans available and endorsed	1 plan	2 plans	2
Indicator 3.2: 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	1,042 <sup>8</sup> people (of whom: 143 women);	1,064
Indicator 3.3: Number of people with strengthened (recognised/ clarified) tenure and/or rights	Number of people with strengthened (recognised/ clarified) tenure and/or rights	0 people	8 people (of whom: 4 women)	8

<sup>8</sup> Of which 636 were engaged through DPLUS132 to classify satellite imagery.

Some Indicators exceeded milestone targets, and some did not. The number of new/improved habitat management plans available and endorsed, far exceeded ambition, as did the number of people with increased participation in local communities / local management organisations (i.e., participation in Governance/citizen engagement).

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

No changes.

**C3. Progress on recommendations from the previous AR (if completed), lessons learned this year and recommendations for the year ahead**

Recommendations for the year ahead:

- See section A3

**C1. Briefly describe the output’s activities and provide supporting narrative for the score.**

Output Title	Programme management is good and adapts to strengthen the delivery of the challenge fund		
Output number:	4	Output Score:	A+
Impact weighting (%):	25%	Weighting revised since last AR?	Yes (down, as 1 more Output Indicator added)

**Table 10.** Progress against output: Programme management is good and adapts to strengthen the delivery of the challenge fund

Overall Indicator(s)	Relevant Indicator(s) and associated results			
	Indicator(s)	Milestone(s) for this review	Progress	Overall progress (over 2 years)
Indicator 4.1: Number of high-quality applications received	No Standard Indicator	Criteria: The number of eligible applications scoring an average of 4 or higher <sup>9</sup> .  Darwin Plus Main Applications are scored at two stages, while all other schemes are scored at only one stage. Darwin Plus Local is not included in this analysis as scoring follows a different approach.	Number of high-quality applications above threshold.  Darwin Plus Round 12  Main St1: 21; Main St2: 22; Fellowship: 3; Strategic: 1 <sup>10</sup>	N/A
Indicator 4.2: Annual Average Project Annual Report and Final Report Scores	No Standard Indicator. However average scores in the range 1.00-2.5 would indicate that most programmes	For Annual Reports, 1 is the highest score achievable <sup>11</sup> . For Final Reports the reporting convention is different. Final Report scores can be	Annual Report Scores  Main: 1.71 (42 Annual Reports)	N/A

<sup>9</sup> Applications are assessed against the fund’s criteria on a 0-6 scale: 6 (Strong Demonstration of Evidence); 5 (Good Demonstration of Evidence); 4 (Acceptable Demonstration of Evidence); 3 (Emerging Demonstration of Evidence); 2 (Weak Demonstration of Evidence); 1 (Minimal demonstration of Evidence); 0 (No demonstration of Evidence). A score of 4 is the indicative scoring threshold of competitive applications.

<sup>10</sup> N.B. only 1 application to D+ Strategic was received under D+ Round 12

<sup>11</sup> Project performance is scored from review of annual reports on a 1-5 scale: 1 (Likely to be completely achieved); 2 (Likely to be largely achieved); 3 (Likely to be partly achieved); 4 (Only likely to be achieved to a very limited extent); 5 (Unlikely to be achieved); X (Too early to judge).

	are on track to achieve their expected outcomes. Aim for maximum average of 2 across the portfolio.	converted into comparable terms <sup>12</sup>	Final Report Scores:  Local: 1.15 (56 Final Reports)  Main: 1.24 (31 Final Reports)	
Indicator 4.3 volume of finance secured to deliver Darwin Plus projects	Projects in latest funded round. Sourced from Flexi-Grant Applications	New indicator. Target not set for 2023-24	£ 2,260,276	
Indicator 4.4: Number of deep dives conducted in the Building and applying evidence workstream	No Standard Indicator	12	6	11

The number of high-quality applications we receive continues to be above the threshold set. Average annual and final scores in the range 1.00-2.5 indicate that most programmes are on track to achieve their expected outcomes. The majority of average annual scores are well below 2, which indicates strong performance across the portfolio.

The result for number of deep dives conducted is well below the target for the year. This is partly because we have taken an intentional step towards fewer, larger deep dives. We will adjust ambition on number of deep dives downward accordingly. Furthermore, Rounds 1 and 2 of the deep dives have been process focused (inward facing). This has meant considerable time spent adjusting internal processes based on results of deep dives, leaving limited time for initiating and managing delivery of new deep dives. However, we have actioned recommendations from deep dives, however, which has led to process improvements in the programme.

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

This Output Indicator is new. We have introduced this to help track Fund management progress (and to ensure alignment with the two other Biodiversity Challenge Funds).

**C3. Progress on recommendations from the previous AR (if completed), lessons learned this year and recommendations for the year ahead**

Recommendations for the year ahead:

- See section A3

**D: RISK**

**Overview of risk management**

The established approach to risk management remains strong. We have updated the Darwin Plus Risk Identification and Mitigation Framework into the ODA Risk Register Format and review it at least every quarter to assign risks, develop mitigating actions, update investigations of live issues and agree escalation processes through the established Defra Governance Structures. All Darwin Plus Main and Strategic projects must provide Delivery Chain Risk Maps with their project-level Risk Frameworks, and regularly monitor risks to inform and manage delivery, and carry out at least annual

<sup>12</sup> A++ (outcome substantially exceeded) = 1; A+ (outcome moderately exceeded) = 1; A (outcome met expectation) = 1; B (outcome moderately did not meet expectation) = 2; C (outcome substantially did not meet expectation) = 3). For D+ Local Final Reports: code projects according to reviewer score (not project self-score). 1 (outcome substantially exceeded) = 1, 2 (outcome moderately exceeded) = 1, 3 (outcome met expectation) = 1, 4 (outcome moderately did not meet expectation) = 2, 5 (outcome substantially did not meet expectation) = 3

review of risk, including these in their annual report. Continuing to operate through a challenge fund approach will help reduce risks by spreading low to high risks between multiple delivery partners, with established track records and processes, across multiple geographies.

In 2024, we reviewed and revised the Fraud Risk Assessment for the BCFs and developed a dedicated Fraud Risk Assessment for Darwin Plus Local. Routine early-stage screening during Round 12 of Darwin Plus Main identified two applications for work in fact taking place in Iraq and Malawi, worth £390k in total, that were rejected on grounds of ineligibility. Darwin Plus Local similarly attracts a small number of applications from ineligible countries, which are rejected during screening.

The overall risk of the programme is assessed as **Moderate**. This is within Defra’s ODA Risk Appetite, which has been revised since the start of the Full Business Case (the Darwin Plus Risk Appetite has been revised accordingly to align with this – see **Table 11**).

**Table 11.** Darwin Plus Risk Appetite.

Risk Type		Risk Appetite	
		Defra ODA	Darwin Plus
Strategic & Context	objectives undermined by a changing context, a lack of clarity or a weak evidence base	Open	Open
Delivery & Operational	capacity to effectively oversee programme implementation	Cautious	Cautious
Financial & Fiduciary	funds/assets not used for intended purposes or not accounted for.	Cautious	Cautious
Project / Programme	weaknesses in project delivery, or projects not aligned to priorities	Open	Open
Reputational	events damaging Defra’s and/or the UK’s reputation	Cautious	Cautious
Safeguarding	failure to establish and maintain strong safeguards to prevent harm	Cautious	Cautious

Progress on recommendations from previous Annual Review:

- See section A3
- **Amend residual risk for Delivery and Operational to moderate by March 2024.**  
We have actioned this.
- **Swap references to Covid with the broader phrase “natural disasters and pandemics” by March 2024.**  
We have actioned this and expanded our assessment of risk of natural disasters by region.
- **Add or amend items (relating to safeguarding and delivery as detailed in the 2022-23 AR), by March 2024.**  
We have actioned this.

In addition to the above, we have considered and included commercial risks and project/programme risks in the Framework.

E: PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT: DELIVERY, COMMERCIAL & FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

Summarise the performance of partners and Defra, notably on commercial and financial issues.

Overall delivery and financial management

There has been a significant uptick in the value of new projects and a major uptick in the number of new projects compared to the previous year, which is largely due to the popularity of the new Darwin Plus Local Scheme (see Section A1). Total grant expenditure has also increased from >£7.1m in FY 2022/23 to >£10m in FY 2023/24.



**We have awarded a total of 78 new projects worth >£10.2m in total (split across 4 years) to start in FY 2024/25**, maintaining the upward trend in total value (Darwin Plus Main/Fellowships Round 11, Darwin Plus Local Rounds 3 and 4, and Darwin Plus Strategic Round 1). This includes the first Darwin Plus Strategic Project. The number of Main and Local applications here is similar to the previous year, although the 2023/24 increase in Fellowships has not been maintained. However, there was a delay in the notification of results for projects starting April 2024, which has had a knock-on impact on project timings. Projects have been advised to submit change requests to compensate for delays if necessary.

We have made strong progress on improving the programme structure (see Sections A1 and A2). Principally, in this reporting period we have:

- Expanded Darwin Plus to include a new funding scheme, Darwin Plus Strategic, aimed at larger-scale, longer-term projects able to drive ambitious outcomes in and between OTs.
- Revised and re-branded Darwin Plus Fellowships as Darwin Plus People & Skills. We launched these changes for Round 13 in April 2024.
- Revised the Theory of Change and Logframe.

International climate and nature commitments

Darwin Plus continues to align with and contribute to the delivery of commitments under UK and OT policies, Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) and Sustainable Development Goals, including the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and its Kunming-Montréal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Paris Alignment: Darwin Plus continues to support UK and OT commitments under the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement for those who have had the treaty extended to them. Darwin Plus aligns with HMG's fossil fuel policy and would not knowingly fund projects which undermine partner countries' own climate plans. Projects are not expected to generate material amount of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. It does not need to complete a Climate and Environment Risk Assessment because the Full Business Case was published prior to 1st January 2023

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;
- Enable Defra to award funding to high-quality projects by making recommendations to ministers on applications for funding;
- Provide strategic advice, and
- 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 2023-24 period, NIRAS commissioned 1 Monitoring Review Report and 1 Mid-Term Review of Darwin Plus Projects, which included field site visits to provide an external perspective on their progress:

- *DPLUS125 - Protecting Anguilla's biodiversity by building capacity in invasive plant management*  
The review concluded that, overall, the project is making good progress to improve capacity to plan and implement invasive plant species management actions on Anguilla and made several recommendations for the project going ahead.
- *DPLUS158 - Piloting a new solution for invasive species in UKOTs*  
The review concluded that the project is highly relevant to Anguilla, and aligns with Anguilla's Government priorities, as well as regional and international agreements concerning invasive species and biodiversity. It found that the project is making very good progress and is on course to meet its deliverables and made some practical recommendations going ahead.

**Delivery**

Darwin Plus continues to be delivered by grantees across the 14 OTs, a small Defra policy team the DPAG and the external fund administrator, 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 in March 2022 to NIRAS, and is available at [www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk](http://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk). This annual review covers the second year of the contract.

An escalation process has also been developed to help monitor overall project management and performance, including tracking whether projects are meeting their reporting deadlines. This process is being followed internally but not yet actively communicated to projects or Experts (for example, informing discussions on applicants from the same organisations to future funding round).

**Darwin Plus Fund Administrator – NIRAS**

NIRAS’ role is to lead on the administration of all 3 BCFs under guidance from Defra, including all correspondence with project partners, reporting, financial, monitoring and evaluation, communications and capacity building aspects. Defra continues to work closely with the NIRAS, maintaining a strong working relationship, streamlining processes, aligning strategic direction and maximising learning.

The Performance Management Framework (PMF), below, is used to monitor, measure, and control NIRAS’ performance of contract responsibilities.<sup>13</sup> The PMF is 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)

- Financial systems are established and operate smoothly. Financial management is delivered well, with project claims processed efficiently. Improvements have been made to project reporting requirements this year, enabling tighter financial control over projects within year, enabling more accurate forecasting.

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

- Lessons learnt continue to be incorporated into each successive round, with a new recommendation tracker implemented to track acceptance and incorporation into the funds of recommendations from deep dives and other sources. Risk management is delivered to a high standard, and coping well with the expansion of the BCFs. As with any agile programme there remains scope for continued lesson learning and feedback.
- A new funding scheme has been introduced under Darwin Plus to better meet the needs of the UKOTs:
  - The first tranche of Darwin Plus Local projects started in April 2023, following the first application round held over FY 2022/23. A second tranche of projects started in October 2023, and a third in April 2024. This scheme has been introduced to support small scale environmental projects, with the aim of building capacity in-Territory and contributing to local economies and has proved to be highly popular with the OTs.
  - In addition, the first application round for Darwin Plus Strategic was held over FY 2023/24 and awarded a single project to RSPB to strengthen biosecurity across the Caribbean OTs, which then commenced in April 2024. This scheme has been introduced to support projects that can demonstrate greater ambition and/or

<sup>13</sup> 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.

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. Following feedback from applicants and grantees and the recommendations of deep dives, version 2.0 of the Standard Indicator guidance was published during this period. The Standard Indicator Menu has been simplified; the number of Standard Indicators has been reduced and there is increased compulsory disaggregation.

*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.

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

- Independent reviews of project Annual Reports and Mid-Term Reviews are used 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 MEL systems (Standard Indicators and reporting) was independently reviewed in 2023-24 and made recommendations to strengthen the value and efficiency of reporting, which are being followed up.

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

- The workstream “Capability and Capacity” sits at the heart for the longer-term aspirations of the BCFs. A Capability and Capacity Lead was recruited in May 2023 to refine and drive this workstream forward. A new strategy for Capability and Capacity was developed in this review year, focussing on ensuring that key gaps in our guidance, as defined by our stakeholders, are being met.
- NIRAS continues to develop and deliver high quality webinars, particularly related to the application cycle and grant start-up, with positive assessments by participants (13 workshops relevant to Darwin Plus hosted between April 2023 – July 2024).

*KPI 7:* Evidence is utilised, and best practices are made available. (Met expectations)

- The quality and usefulness of the deep dives has met, arguably exceeded, expectations. The quantity of deep dives completed was lower-than-expected, due to an intentional focus on quality and uptake. As detailed in section C, targets will be adjusted to in 24/25 year to be more realistic, and maintain a focus on quality over quantity.
- A strong pipeline of prioritised deep dives is in place. Version 2.0 of the Standard Indicator guidance was published during this period.

*KPI 8:* International awareness and understanding of the funds is strengthened. (Met expectations)

- Good progress has been made against the workstream “Communications”. NIRAS recruited a Communications and Workshop Lead in May 2023 to support the increased ambition for this workstream. NIRAS and Defra worked closely together to develop a Communications Strategy. A Darwin Plus-specific website and newsletter was developed and launched.

**Recommendation:** Refine and review Performance Management Framework to ensure KPIs remain relevant and measurable by June 2025.

**E2. Assess the VfM of this output compared to the proposition in the Business Case, based on performance over the past year**

**Darwin Plus continues to indicate good Value for Money (VfM) based on the Four Es:** Economy, Efficiency, Effectiveness and Equity.

The complex and diverse nature of Darwin Plus makes it challenging to assess VfM comprehensively. The programme supports diverse types of conservation projects producing different outputs and outcomes and involving many different species across radically different landscapes and climates. Nonetheless, we have implemented numerous measures since the start of the Full Business Case in April 2022 to maximise and evidence VfM, which are covered in the 2022-23 Annual Review.

Recently, we have developed a VfM framework as part of the ongoing VfM deep dive. This framework has been designed to map indicators against the four E's: Economy, Efficiency, Effectiveness and Equity. This will help to standardise and ensure high quality, disaggregated reporting on Value for Money across the programme, allowing us to comprehensively assess actual performance. It is recommended that this framework is adapted for use in evaluating the VfM in the programme, delivering results in the next annual review as data become available.

Evidence gaps reduce our understanding of Darwin Plus' VfM and hinder effective measures to improve it. This weakens the case for its continued support. Therefore, further ongoing activity and plans are in place to strengthen our approach going ahead include:

- **Publication of the new OT Biodiversity Strategy in early 2025**, containing each of the Territories' priorities for conservation to support applications in what matters most locally.
  - We intend to keep the strategy "live" and relevant through annual consultation with OT governments.
- **Further development of the framework for calculating VfM across the BCFs**, with quantitative VfM indicators tailored for each Fund.
- **Ongoing deep dive on VfM across the BCFs** (previously mentioned), aiming to:
  - Explore a process of regular, systematic assessment of VfM in projects.
  - Identify opportunities to collect higher quality data to inform enhanced assessment of VfM, including a cost-benefit analysis and monetisation of benefits.
- **Ongoing deep dive on sustainability across the BCFs** (as previously mentioned) to:
  - Identify the different pathways where projects have brought about sustained benefits.
  - Identify the key factors for sustaining positive impacts.
  - Develop guidance for those selecting, managing/supporting, and implementing projects to ensure more sustained positive impacts over time.
- **Ongoing development of the BCF Evaluation** (as previously mentioned), which will be assessing how VfM in the BCFs compares with other conservation programmes (using a similar four Es framework), with initial results planned for 2026.

The conclusions from the deep dives will both build the evidence base for Darwin Plus' VfM in terms of sustainability of impacts and provide valuable advice on how to strengthen and monitor this going ahead.

Date of last narrative financial report	2022-23	Date of last audited annual statement	N/A
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Category	Sub-category	Item	Value	Unit	Location	Notes
Category 1	Sub-category 1	Item 1.1	100	kg	Warehouse A	Stock on hand
		Item 1.2	200	kg	Warehouse B	Stock on hand
		Item 1.3	300	kg	Warehouse C	Stock on hand
		Item 1.4	400	kg	Warehouse D	Stock on hand
		Item 1.5	500	kg	Warehouse E	Stock on hand
		Item 1.6	600	kg	Warehouse F	Stock on hand
		Item 1.7	700	kg	Warehouse G	Stock on hand
		Item 1.8	800	kg	Warehouse H	Stock on hand
		Item 1.9	900	kg	Warehouse I	Stock on hand
		Item 1.10	1000	kg	Warehouse J	Stock on hand
Category 2	Sub-category 2	Item 2.1	100	kg	Warehouse A	Stock on hand
		Item 2.2	200	kg	Warehouse B	Stock on hand
		Item 2.3	300	kg	Warehouse C	Stock on hand
		Item 2.4	400	kg	Warehouse D	Stock on hand
		Item 2.5	500	kg	Warehouse E	Stock on hand
		Item 2.6	600	kg	Warehouse F	Stock on hand
		Item 2.7	700	kg	Warehouse G	Stock on hand
		Item 2.8	800	kg	Warehouse H	Stock on hand
		Item 2.9	900	kg	Warehouse I	Stock on hand
		Item 2.10	1000	kg	Warehouse J	Stock on hand

[illegible]

[illegible]

	[REDACTED]			[REDACTED]		[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]	[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]  [REDACTED] [REDACTED]  [REDACTED] [REDACTED]  [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]  [REDACTED]  [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]  [REDACTED]  [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
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