Evaluation of Jobs for Nature

Year 3 report

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ALLEN + CLARKE

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MAIN MESSAGES

The $1.185 billion Jobs for Nature programme successfully demonstrated that large-scale, cross-agency environmental funding programmes can be effectively implemented. The three-year independent evaluation provides insights for designing future programmes of similar scale and complexity.

Cross-agency collaboration works with the right architecture

The J4N programme succeeded because of strong Ministerial commitment, formal programme architecture including a dedicated Secretariat, and allowing agencies to retain autonomy over their expertise areas while contributing to shared goals enabled effective collaboration.

Procurement must be adaptive to evolving priorities and contexts

The J4N programme demonstrated the value of flexible procurement strategies that evolved from rapid job creation (leveraging existing initiatives) to procurement approaches that built local capacity and supported iwi development.
However, misaligned contracting models across agencies created challenges, causing confusion and high compliance costs for funded organisations.

Regional partnerships deliver when built on existing foundations

The DOC-supported Regional Partnership Groups that built on pre-existing collaborative structures (like Kotahitanga mō te Taiao) were more effective and sustainable than newly created entities. Success of these groups hinges on providing adequate operational funding for coordination activities.

Strategic capacity building creates lasting value

J4N successfully shifted from immediate job creation to long-term capability building, resulting in sustainable employment pathways and enhanced environmental stewardship capacity, particularly for iwi and hapū.

Data systems require early planning and standardisation

Inconsistent metrics and reporting requirements across agencies limited comprehensive programme assessment and created unnecessary administrative burden. This highlights the importance of early planning for data systems and standardised metrics to prevent costly retrofitting and enable effective cross-agency monitoring and evaluation.

Embedded and ongoing sustainability planning enables lasting impact

The programme created significant employment and environmental benefits, with long-term environmental impacts showing promise. Engaging in early sustainability and transition planning, and providing ongoing support to maintain momentum beyond the initial programme phase is crucial for sustained impact.

Early attention to critical success factors enhances programme effectiveness

Large-scale, cross-agency, targeted funding programmes like J4N require careful attention to design and implementation factors across multiple components. The evaluation identified critical success factors that agencies should consider when implementing similar initiatives, organised by key programme components in the table below.

Cross-agency approach	• Establish a well-resourced secretariat from the outset to align agencies, maintain focus, and provide a single line of communication to Ministers.	• Ensure incentive settings are conducive to collaboration by balancing incentives (such as funding) with directives (such as Ministerial mandates for cooperation).	• Recognise individual agency priorities by allowing agencies to retain autonomy to contribute to shared objectives without compromising their core missions.
Procurement and contracting approach	• Regardless of delivery pressures, ensure projects include business cases or modelling of expected benefits, costs, and risks, ensuring shared understanding among stakeholders.	• Consider social procurement approaches to build capacity and capability, particularly for iwi and local businesses, with adequate support and active contract management to ensure successful outcomes.	• Align contracting approaches across agencies to standardise terms, performance metrics, and reporting requirements, facilitating collaboration and streamlining project management.
Regional arrangements	• Build on existing groups to enhance effectiveness, leveraging established trust and local knowledge for future crisis response or funding opportunities.	• Ensure effective strategic facilitation with strong leadership and capacity building for regional groups to manage restoration projects effectively.	• Invest adequate resources into the functioning of regional groups, including funding for coordination and secretariat functions, to maintain focus and momentum.
Capacity building	• Embed formal training and qualifications into project delivery requirements to ensure individuals have the necessary knowledge and skills for effective environmental project management.	• Establish strong partnerships with iwi, hapū, and Māori to support long-term capacity building, respecting their autonomy and leveraging their expertise for sustainable project outcomes.	• Develop a clear mechanism to articulate environmental and conservation capacity needs, using this intelligence to strategically plan and address current gaps and future requirements.
Data, reporting and accountability	• Agree on programme-level reporting requirements early to avoid delays and inconsistencies, ensuring all stakeholders have a shared understanding of data needs.	• Establish standardised data collection methods and definitions to ensure comparability and reliability across initiatives, facilitating accurate impact assessment.	• Design reporting processes to be straightforward and efficient, providing support to smaller organisations to meet requirements without compromising data quality.

Project delivery	• Set clear objectives and well-defined deliverables to provide a structured roadmap, ensuring stakeholder alignment and adaptability for successful project outcomes. • Ensure projects appoint a dedicated project manager from the outset to provide clear leadership, consistent oversight, and effective coordination of project activities.	• Ensure meaningful participation and leadership from iwi, hapū, and Māori to achieve long-term impacts and honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi commitments.	• Where possible, support projects that secure matched funding to amplify initial investments and sustain efforts over time, enhancing the project's impact and longevity.
Transition and sustainability	• Integrate sustainability planning into the initial project design and provide ongoing support to ensure long-term success, treating funding as 'seed funding' for future aspirations	• Maintain agile project structures that can scale up or down, allowing flexibility and adaptation to sustain projects over time and respond to evolving needs and challenges.	• Provide consistent support throughout the project lifecycle, including access to expertise, funding, and resources, to maintain momentum and achieve long-term sustainability.

Executive summary

Jobs for Nature (J4N) is a $1.185 billion programme that manages funding across multiple government agencies to benefit the environment, people, and the regions. The J4N Secretariat commissioned a three-year, independent evaluation of the programme. The evaluation aims to learn from the programme's set-up, implementation processes, and determine the likelihood of achieving expected results for both participants and the environment.

This report presents findings from the third and final year of the evaluation. This focused on generating evidence that could be used to inform the delivery of future large-scale, cross-agency, targeted funding programmes. The purpose of the Year 3 evaluation was to assess key components of the J4N programme model, including which aspects of the model worked well, what challenges or issues were experienced, and what lessons could be captured.

The Year 3 evaluation aims to address three key evaluation questions (KEQs):

1. How well was the J4N programme implemented?
2. What are the critical success factors for effective large-scale, cross-agency, targeted funding programmes?
3. What can be learnt from the J4N programme that can be applied to future large scale, cross-agency, targeted funding programmes?

The Year 3 evaluation used a mixed methods approach. The qualitative methods included a review and analysis of 53 documents and reports, and interviews with 18 J4N programme stakeholders. Quantitative methods included an analysis of programme administrative data from June 2020 to December 2024.

Key findings

The cross-agency model was enabled by a comprehensive programme architecture

The J4N programme involved a collaborative effort across five government agencies. Cross-agency collaboration was enabled by multiple mechanisms at various levels, including a Sustainable Land Use (SLU) Ministers' group, Reference Group, Deputy Chief Executives Group, a Secretariat and several interagency committees. The effort and commitment to establish this programme architecture was key to the rapid set-up and implementation of the J4N programme.

The programme architecture was mostly effective, and was successful in enhancing strategic collaboration and reducing overlaps between agency funding streams. The substantial funding available, sense of urgency and purpose in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as shared objectives and an Investment Framework created an impetus to make the cross-agency model work.

Some agencies were more strongly committed to the cross-agency approach than others. Those more fully committed demonstrated strong support and buy-in from all levels within the

agency, including senior management who understood and supported the joint outcomes and collective value of the programme. Participation in cross-agency processes provided valuable learning opportunities, with agencies sharing ideas and lessons in policy development, programme design and implementation strategies, and on procurement and contracting practices. Critically, agencies were able to retain autonomy over their specific funding streams and align their individual agency outcomes to the broader J4N objectives. This provided a sense of ownership and accountability for their contributions to the programme.

Other agencies were less committed to the cross-agency effort, with some agencies being uncertain about its benefits, particularly if they were integrating an existing programme into J4N. Moreover, the cross-agency approach was not able to fully overcome agency silos and the energy and commitment to collaboration diminished over time as the programme transitioned into business-as-usual operations.

Recommendations

To set future cross-agency programmes up for success, Ministers and agency leadership should:

- Ensure strong buy-in and leadership commitment from top-level officials, including Ministers and Chief Executives, with clear mandates for cross-agency collaboration that can be sustained throughout the programme lifecycle.
- Create formal independent advisory bodies with diverse expertise, clear roles and responsibilities, and the authority to provide strategic oversight and challenge agencies on programme objectives.
- Design appropriate incentive settings that balance funding incentives with accountability measures to motivate genuine collaboration while respecting individual agency mandates and expertise.

Once established, the secretariat or other coordination function should:

- Set up processes for joint interagency activity, including interagency committees focused on specific programme aspects such as risk management, benefits realisation, and programme transition to promote transparency, knowledge sharing, and integrated implementation.
- Balance collaborative objectives with agency autonomy by allowing agencies to retain decision-making authority within their areas of expertise while contributing to shared programme goals.

Agencies determined their own approach to procurement within parameters established in the Investment Framework

The urgency to establish the J4N programme quickly resulted in an initial focus on accelerating and scaling up existing initiatives though existing funding streams, such as for wilding conifer control, freshwater restoration and biosecurity. This was an effective response enabling the use of existing data, models and business cases, and providing a degree of confidence in the expected outcomes.

In addition, agencies' procurement approaches leveraged existing knowledge and relationships by looking to organisations they had a current or past relationship with, and organisations with established infrastructure and financial capability. This included iwi and hapū, regional councils, and long-standing NGOs. Agencies were able to adopt a flexible procurement approach with these partners to expedite the programme.

As the J4N programme pivoted to emphasise environmental outcomes alongside employment objectives, some agencies adopted social procurement approaches to prioritise suppliers and contractors able to deliver on this expanded mandate. These approaches included selecting projects that could demonstrate use of local suppliers, provide pastoral care and training to employees, and that built iwi capacity and capability. Such approaches involved contracting less established organisations which often required additional effort from agencies to support organisations with various requirements. Agencies continued to use contestable funding approaches and adapted these over time in response to feedback on application processes.

Agencies' contracting models were not well aligned, particularly in the early stages of the programme. There was misalignment in reporting requirements and payment models, which created confusion and added to compliance costs for funded organisations. Despite attempts to streamline contracting requirements across agencies, different administrative systems and requirements from agency legal teams meant that barriers to cross-agency contracting could not be overcome.

The rapid pace of procurement and contracting in the early stages of the programme resulted in some projects being poorly scoped, with initial contract pricing underestimated. While some projects successfully renegotiated contracts to adjust for rising costs and shifting employment targets, others struggled to secure variations, indicating mixed success in contract flexibility.

Recommendations

Agencies implementing future large-scale, cross-agency programmes should:

- Use adaptive procurement and contracting approaches by developing flexible procurement strategies that can adapt to evolving programme needs, including the ability to adjust contracts in response to changing circumstances or shifting programme priorities.
- Align contracting approaches across agencies by standardising contract terms, payment models, performance metrics, and reporting requirements to reduce confusion, compliance burdens, and administrative costs for organisations holding multiple contracts.
- Implement proportionate business case requirements that are scaled to project size and organisational capacity, with agencies providing support to smaller organisations that may lack the capability to develop comprehensive business cases.

Collaboration at a regional level enabled more coherent and locally-responsive investment

The Department of Conservation (DOC) sought to establish Regional Partnership Groups as part of the J4N programme to create a unified vision at the regional level, with collaborative efforts from various stakeholders working towards a common goal. Where possible, the

development of regional groups drew on existing structures such as the Kotahitanga mō te Taiao alliance in Te Tau Ihu/top of the South Island. Elsewhere, establishing regional groups required significant time and effort to foster trust, mutual understanding, and effective collaboration among the members.

Regional groups drew on their local knowledge and insights to make recommendations on J4N investments to DOC in their regions. Key strengths of the regional approach included:

- the ability to utilise group members' expertise to identify where the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 were most likely to be felt within the region so that J4N investment could most effectively meet job creation objectives
- the ability to take a holistic approach to investment across a region, enabling coordinated funding for restoration at a regional scale.

While the majority of regional groups discontinued meeting post-J4N, the relationships formed have built strong foundation for sustained and future collaboration.

The involvement of key regional entities, including regional councils and iwi, was critical to the success of regional groups. The involvement of regional councils played a key role in guiding the direction of these groups, ensuring effective coordination and alignment with regional resource and environmental strategies. Attempting to set up collaborative structures in response to significant crises or funding opportunities can be challenging. The ability to use pre-existing, self-determined regional models appears to be more effective in fostering long-term collaboration and achieving regional goals..

Recommendations

Agencies implementing future large-scale, cross-agency programmes with regional components should:

- Leverage existing networks by identifying and assessing pre-existing collaborative structures before establishing new regional entities
- Create strong incentives for sustained engagement that provide clear value propositions for regional group participants, including meaningful input into programme direction
- Allocate dedicated operational funding for coordination activities, including meeting facilitation, communication systems, and administrative functions.

There was an increased focus on building people capability and skills after an initial focus on job creation and employment starts

Initially, J4N focused on supporting projects that could be quickly established and would create immediate and substantial employment opportunities. These jobs, such as wilding conifer control, trapping and track maintenance, did not require extensive skill development. This focus aligned to the forecast significant impact of COVID-19 on employment and was effective in enabling people who were out of work, including those affected by the pandemic, into employment.

By mid-2021, the J4N programme was reframed to focus on long-term capability building. This led to changes in programme investment criteria, greater weight on projects with skills and training components in assessment decisions, and renegotiation of some existing contracts to adjust project FTE targets where needed. Data on the amount of formal training shows a significant uptick from this point and some projects demonstrated an ability to support capacity building at scale, including in scientific and technical skills.

Strategic approaches to capacity building were successfully adopted. For example, agencies facilitated efforts to build capacity in freshwater improvement and community catchment groups that could contribute to long-term environmental management. Moreover, iwi and hapū used capacity built through J4N to develop taiao units that would enable them to exercise autonomy and self-determination in addressing long-term environmental challenges, and to live and work on their whenua.

Recommendations

In line with these critical success factors, future cross-agency programmes should:

- Conduct comprehensive workforce planning by investing in sector-wide skills assessments and establishing systems to identify current and future capacity needs.
- Develop a capacity building strategy guiding the allocation of programme resources to address priority skill shortages and regional requirements.

There are clear enablers to effective project delivery

The J4N programme highlighted the importance of building strong networks and partnerships for successful project delivery. Collaborations with central and local government, iwi, Māori organisations, landowners, and scientific institutions were crucial. These partnerships enhanced job creation and environmental impacts by integrating local knowledge and cultural values into project practices.

Projects with clear objectives that aligned with implementing organisations' goals and values were more likely to succeed, enabling sustained engagement and effective delivery. Strong alignment between programme and stakeholder aspirations provided a foundation for meaningful collaboration and long-term project success. Effective project management was essential for the success of J4N projects. Projects with dedicated managers from the outset were better able to plan, coordinate, and oversee activities, ensuring goals were met on time and within budget.

At the programme level, DOC's implementation of the 'delivery managers' model enabled advisors to become highly familiar with each of their assigned projects, facilitating better coordination and problem-solving. However, effectiveness varied between regions, with some facing challenges due to managers being overstretched.

Recommendations

Agencies implementing future large-scale, cross-agency programmes should:

- Create mechanisms to connect projects with relevant networks to leverage additional resources and expertise.
- Require the appointment of dedicated project managers from programme inception with clear accountability for coordination and delivery outcomes.

Inconsistencies in programme metrics and reporting requirements meant that comprehensive programme assessment was difficult

The speed of programme design and implementation meant that consistent definitions of key output metrics, such as a definition of a 'job', were not determined at the outset. The five agencies had diverse data and reporting requirements, and information management systems. This led to inconsistency, overlapping measures, unnecessary complexity and, ultimately, no reliable way to develop a programme-wide view and limited the data that could be used to assess progress.

Once metrics were agreed, agencies needed to retrofit the requirements into existing contracts and information management systems. This involved a substantial administrative burden for the agencies, as well as the organisations contracted to deliver the projects. Projects described inconsistent requirements between the five government agencies, and the burden and associated high compliance cost of reporting. Agencies reflected that reporting requirements were initially confusing, too frequent, and generated data that was not always useful.

The frequency of reporting for projects with contracted periodic reporting requirements was reduced from monthly to quarterly in the programme's second year. Other amendments made the data more robust and consistent, however, several issues remained that were not resolved during the programme.

Recommendations

Agencies designing future large-scale, cross-agency programmes should:

- Establish data frameworks and standardised metrics before programme launch to ensure consistency across agencies and enable accurate progress tracking and impact assessment.
- Design reporting systems that balance data collection needs with organisational capacity, including streamlined processes for smaller organisations and appropriate reporting frequencies.
- Build in regular review and refinement processes for reporting requirements based on programme experience to continuously improve data quality and reduce compliance burden.

The transition and sustainability of projects was considered early and a transition strategy developed, but realising these plans is often difficult without further support

J4N was designed as a finite programme as part of the government's COVID-19 recovery package. Applicants were asked to consider sustainability, and it was included as an assessment criteria. Some projects built sustainability and maintenance considerations into their planning, and/or had plans in place to secure future funding – particularly projects led by iwi, council, community or long-established community organisations. Towards the end of the programme, the government published a transition strategy to ensure the long-term impact of the investment.

Despite efforts to encourage sustainability planning, it was clear that many projects would struggle with the post-programme transition without additional guidance, direction, and support. In particular, community groups and smaller organisations frequently lacked the capacity and experience to secure alternative funding sources or generate sufficient revenue to maintain their activities.

There is mixed evidence on the likely sustainability of the programme's benefits

The J4N programme has the potential to contribute to a sustainable environmental workforce, particularly because of its effective shift to focus on longer-term employment prospects and capability building. Some staff have transitioned to permanent employment or secured ongoing contract work. Training received through J4N, including education and training credits and diverse work experience, was reported to be instrumental in creating these pathways.

It is more difficult to determine the likely sustainability of J4N's environmental impacts, although there is evidence that some projects are enhancing the potential for enduring environmental benefits. This is particularly evident in iwi-led initiative, which are grounded in a deep, intergenerational commitment to environmental stewardship and protection and restoration of natural resources. Additionally, mechanisms such as covenants and landowner agreements have been employed to help secure the long-term preservation and restoration of ecosystems beyond the life of the programme.

Recommendations

Agencies designing future large-scale, cross-agency programmes should:

- Develop a comprehensive transition strategy early in the programme to ensure long-term impact. This should include a focus on ongoing support to plan for sustainable impact during delivery.
- Engage delivery agencies and project partners in discussions about long-term needs and facilitate collaboration and resource sharing to support sustainability.

The experience of J4N presents lessons for future large scale programmes

The J4N programme underscored the importance of fostering a culture of collaboration among participating agencies. The success of J4N demonstrated that with strong leadership commitment and the establishment of a secretariat function, cross-agency collaboration can be highly effective.

The programme also highlighted the need for aligned metrics from the outset to accurately track and report progress. Collecting demographic data is crucial to understand who benefits from the programme and to ensure inclusivity and equity. A single reporting system across funds and agencies would further streamline processes and reduce administrative overhead.

J4N demonstrated some success in adopting agile and adaptive procurement strategies. Accelerating or scaling up existing initiatives can leverage established data and models for swift decision-making. Social procurement approaches, which prioritise suppliers delivering additional community value, can achieve broader benefits.

Investing in capacity building for all involved agencies and stakeholders is essential for the effective management of large-scale programmes. The J4N programme provided capability-building opportunities through cross-agency processes, enhancing the skills and resources needed for effective programme management. Strategic capacity building should focus on long-term skill development to address national skill shortages and ensure sustainability.

The J4N programme's focus on building local capacity and securing additional funding for continued work beyond the initial phase was key to its success. Developing robust plans for the long-term maintenance of benefits and building strong networks and alliances are essential for sustainable impacts.

1 Introduction

This report presents the findings from the final year of the three-year independent evaluation of the Jobs for Nature (J4N) programme. The first year of the evaluation reported on three place-based case studies. The second year of the evaluation reported on three thematic case studies, outlining the social impact, climate resilience, and freshwater restoration. During the second year, a companion report presented evaluation findings with a Te Ao Māori focus.

This third and final year of the evaluation was conducted as the J4N programme came to an end, from September 2024 to June 2025. As such, the Year 3 evaluation has focused on generating evidence that can be used to inform the delivery of future initiatives that share similar characteristics to J4N.

1.1 The Jobs for Nature programme

J4N was a $1.185 billion programme that manages funding across multiple government agencies to benefit the environment, people, and the regions. It was part of the COVID-19 recovery package. The objectives of the J4N programme were to:

- create nature-related employment opportunities for people, at pace, in regions that need work the most
- realise enduring benefits for freshwater ecosystems and water quality, biodiversity, climate change and cultural values
- support sustainable land use and the implementation of new regulatory requirements, including for freshwater, biodiversity and climate change.

The programme was overseen by the Sustainable Land Use (SLU) Ministers' group[1], which was created to provide strategic oversight, make decisions, and have overall accountability for the programme. The SLU Ministers established the strategic principles, priorities, and overall funding phases for the programme. A J4N Reference Group supported the SLU Ministers, providing insight into what was needed to deliver a diverse, regionally spread programme. The Reference Group encompassed a range of perspectives including Māori landowners, regional councils, recovery experience, and NGOs, with an independent chair. A key aspect of the Reference Group's work was the creation of an Investment Framework to guide strategic funding decisions for the programme.

J4N was delivered through 25 separate funds across the Department of Conservation (DOC), Ministry for the Environment (MfE), Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI), Kānoa Regional Economic Development and Investment Unit (Kānoa), and Land Information New Zealand (LINZ). Each agency had control over its area of the programme, with implementation design and decisions made within individual departments and ministries. A Secretariat played a coordinating function across the programme, supporting Ministers, providing consolidated

[1] SLU Ministers' group was comprised of the Minister for the Environment, Minister of Local Government, Minister of Agriculture, Minister of Biosecurity, Minister for Economic and Regional Development, Minister of Forestry, Minister for Climate Change, Minister of Conservation, and Minister for Land Information.

reporting and programme-level insights, and acting as a conduit between the delivery agencies.

Projects funded through J4N ranged from large scale regional or national initiatives to small community projects. The funding supported people into nature-based work. Specific activities included vegetation planting for freshwater and biodiversity restoration; fencing waterways; pest control (including predators, wilding conifers and other pest plants); fish passage remediation; and skills training to support people into environmental careers. Organisations that received funding include local government, iwi, community groups, and private companies.

1.2 Evaluation purpose

The J4N Secretariat commissioned a three year, independent evaluation of the J4N programme. The purpose of the evaluation is to understand how effectively the programme was implemented and the extent to which it is on track to deliver its intended outcomes for participants and the environment. Specifically, the purpose of the evaluation was to:

- Learn from the set-up, implementation, and results of the programme to inform future cross-government initiatives.
- Assess the extent to which the potential future outcomes for the participants and the environment are likely to be achieved.

This report presents the findings of the third and final year of the evaluation (henceforth referred to as the 'Year 3 evaluation'). The focus of the Year 3 evaluation was on generating evidence that could be used to inform the delivery of future initiatives that share similar characteristics to J4N (i.e., large-scale, cross-agency, targeted funding programmes). To that end, its specific purpose was to assess key components of the J4N programme model, including which aspects of the model worked well, what challenges or issues were experienced, and what lessons could be captured.

The evaluation also includes a synthesis of findings, based on data collected during the Year 1, Year 2, Year 3 and Te Ao Māori evaluations, under the criteria of effectiveness, relevance, additionality, coherence, sustainability, and learning and improvement. This is provided in a separate report *1.2 billion for nature: What Jobs for Nature delivered.*

1.3 Key evaluation questions

The Year 3 evaluation data collection aims to address the following key evaluation questions (KEQs):

1. How well was the J4N programme implemented?
    a. How effective were the following components of the programme model: cross-agency arrangements; procurement and contracting; regional arrangements; capacity building; project delivery; data, report and accountability; and sustainability.

2. What are the critical success factors for effective large-scale, cross-agency, targeted funding programmes?
3. What can be learnt from the J4N programme that can be applied to future large scale, cross-agency, targeted funding programmes?

In addition, the data from the Year 1, Year 2, Year 3 and Te Ao Māori evaluations has been synthesised to answer a series of overarching KEQs related to effectiveness, relevance, coherence, additionality, sustainability, and learning and improvement Details on these overarching KEQs, and the synthesis of evaluation findings, are provided in the report *$1.2 billion for nature: What Jobs for Nature delivered.*

1.4 Year 3 evaluation methodology

The evaluation used a mixed methods approach to answer the Year 3 KEQs. Details of the data collection methods are provided below.

Analysis of extant documents and reports

The J4N Secretariat provided a range of reports and documents related to J4N programme design and delivery. These included annual programme review reports, economic impact assessments, benefits insights reports, independent reviews of the programme, project case study reports, and data extracted from project closure reports.

During the course of undertaking the key informant interviews (see below), further documents were provided to the evaluators. These documents focused on the delivery of the programme, or specific funds within it, including procurement materials, agency strategies, response to information requests and reports or materials from contracted delivery partners.

In total, 53 documents were received and reviewed. Of these, 46 were found to contain relevant information and have been referenced in this report. A list of the documents reviewed is provided in Appendix A:.

The evaluators undertook a deductive review of documents against the Year 3 KEQs. The results of the review were analysed to identify key themes under each of the components of the J4N model, and to identify critical success factors that can inform the delivery of similar initiatives in the future.

The results of the document review were triangulated against the primary data generated through the interviews to validate and contextualise the findings related to the J4N programme, and fact check information where relevant.

Qualitative interviews

The Year 3 evaluation included qualitative interviews with 18 J4N stakeholders. These interviews aimed to fill gaps or provide additional detail on topics that were not able to be fully explored through the analysis of existing data and reports.

The interview sample, selected through purposive sampling, included representatives of the five government agencies at the central and regional levels, an Advisory Group member, and members of Regional Partnership Groups.

The interviews focused on components of the programme model that were relevant to the interviewees' role and involvement in the J4N programme. The interview guide is provided in Appendix B:.

Analysis of quantitative J4N programme data

The Year 3 evaluation updated the quantitative data analyses that were undertaken in Year 2, with an additional two quarters of data (Q1 2024/25 and Q2 2024/25).

An administrative dataset combining the project reporting data from all five participating agencies as at 31 December 2024 was supplied to *Allen + Clarke*. After removing project codes allocated to the administration of the J4N funds[2], the dataset described 510 projects in total with quarterly metrics from December 2019 to December 2024 comprising up to 17 data points for each project. The data analysis included metrics related to the funding investment distribution, employment statistics and environmental outputs.

1.5 Limitations

The quantitative data has several limitations. The different funding streams and project outcomes had differing metrics recorded, as projects had varying deliverables. For example, hours worked and employment starts were well reported and common across all projects, whereas other metrics (such as hectares planted for different environments) had more variation to allow projects to report directly against their contracted outcomes. While some of these metrics overlapped or measured slightly different things, there were existing summary metrics that were used for this report or that were derived from existing metrics. There was also some inconsistency in the extent to which project metrics were entered by the funded projects, for example some data were recorded at regular intervals while other data were entered at irregular intervals, summarising work to date.

The findings from the qualitative interviews provide data only on the perspectives of those that participated in the evaluation. The Year 3 interviews were mostly with government agency representatives involved in the design and delivery of the programme. As such, the evaluation relies heavily on self-reported data from participants, which is vulnerable to biases such as social desirability bias. Whilst their perspective is valuable, and critical for the evaluation, it is not neutral and should be interpreted with caution. To partially mitigate this, the evaluation drew on data from a range of independent reports, which included engagement with individuals and organisations who were not directly involved in programme design.

The J4N programme is a five-year initiative, which aimed to create long-term environmental impacts. While the delivery of environmental outputs is observable, the anticipated

[2] Excluded were 13 project IDs labelled as 'Admin' or 'Overheads' in the supplied data. These were for activities such as partnership establishment, support roles, overheads, programme set up or close down, and coordination/programme management. Collectively $47.3 million has been paid out.

environmental outcomes are not likely to be realised until the medium-long term and may not be possible to capture within the timeframe of this evaluation.

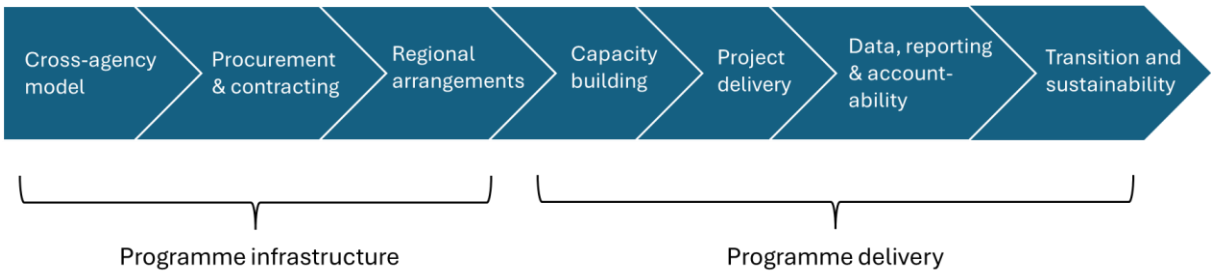
2 Year 3 evaluation findings

This section presents the evaluation findings from data collected during Year 3 of the evaluation. It addresses Year 3 Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) 1 and 2:

1. How well was the J4N programme implemented?
    a. How effective were the following components of the programme model: cross-agency arrangements; procurement and contracting; regional arrangements; capacity building; project delivery; data, report and accountability; and sustainability.
2. What are the critical success factors for effective large-scale, cross-agency, targeted funding programmes?

The section is structured to the key components of the model identified in KEQ1a. As shown in Figure 1 below, it first discusses features of the infrastructure set up to support the programme, including the cross-agency approach; procurement and contracting; and regional arrangements. It then discusses key mechanisms for programme delivery, highlighting capacity building; project delivery; data, reporting and accountability; and sustainability.

Figure 1: Key components of the J4N programme infrastructure and delivery model

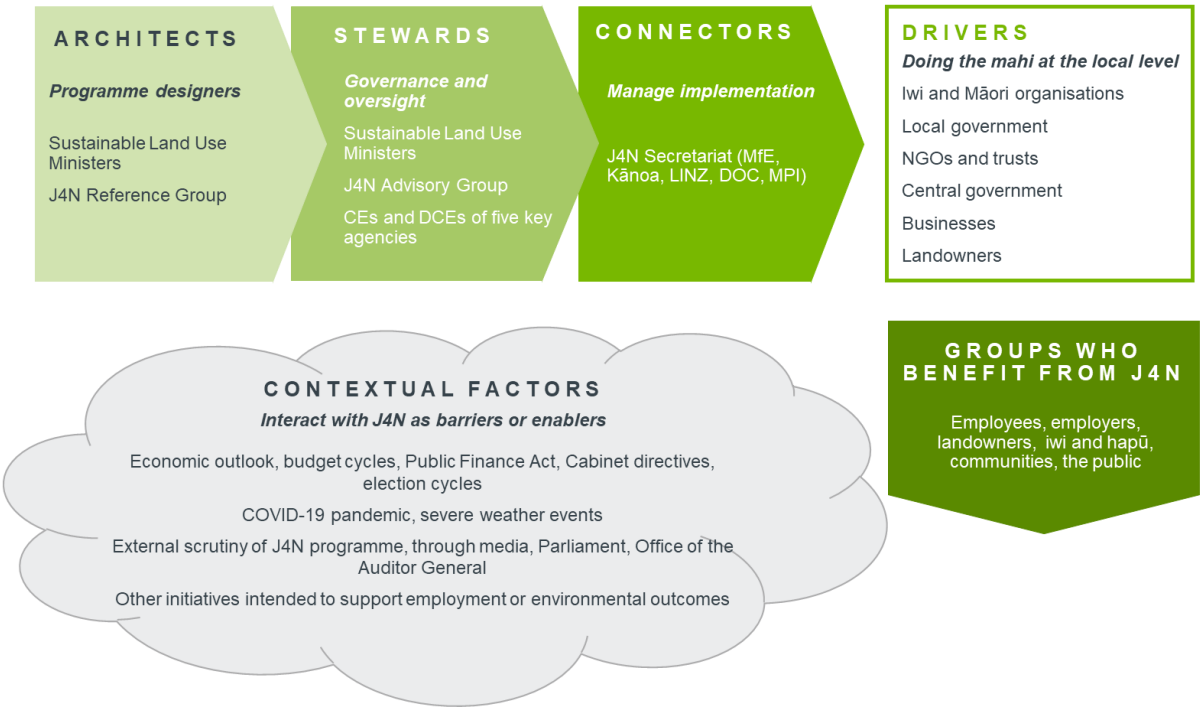


2.1 The cross-agency model

The J4N programme involved a collaborative effort among five government agencies: MfE, DOC, MPI, Kānoa, and LINZ. The agencies worked together to manage and deliver the programme.

The cross-agency model involved a range of stakeholder groups that played various roles in programme design, delivery, and implementation. The *Allen + Clarke* evaluation team developed a system ecology map (Figure 2), which provides an overview of the key stakeholder groups and their roles in the J4N programme.

Figure 2: J4N system ecology



The examination of the cross-agency model undertaken in Year 3 of the evaluation focused primarily on collecting data related to the 'architects', 'stewards', and 'connectors' within the system ecology. Key findings related to the effectiveness of these aspects of the cross-agency model are discussed in this report.

Findings related to programme delivery by the 'drivers' and discussion on outcomes delivered to groups who were expected to benefit from J4N are discussed in the report presenting the summary of findings from the three-year evaluation; *$1.2 billion for nature: What J4N delivered.*

2.1.1 Effectiveness of the cross-agency model

Implementing a cross-agency programme of this scale and complexity was a significant undertaking, against a backdrop of pandemic-related uncertainty (Ministry for the Environment, 2023c). The evaluation found that operationalising the cross-agency approach required establishing structures at all levels of the system. This demanded sustained effort and commitment at all tiers, from Ministers to personnel in the five agencies. Interviews with government agency representatives found that the context of dire economic forecasts due to the COVID-19 pandemic provided the impetus for quickly establishing cross-agency structures at multiple levels of the system.

The evaluation evidence shows that the J4N cross-government approach was mostly effective, successfully enhancing strategic collaboration and reducing overlaps between agency funding streams.

The substantial J4N investment provided impetus to make cross agency processes work

Interviews with government agency personnel who were involved in the cross-agency approach discussed how the scale of J4N created an incentive to work across agencies, actively looking for ways to align and leverage investment beyond agency-specific programmatic funding.

Interviewees noted how, while ministries and departments have separate mandates, there are many overlaps, gaps and intertwined work programmes. Most government agency interview participants had been in the public sector for most of their careers and had been involved in previous attempts to work in a cross-agency setting. The success of these other initiatives was described as mixed, with J4N commonly characterised as the most successful cross-agency programme interviewees had been involved in. It was reported that the substantial amount of funding available, sense of urgency in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and shared objectives and Investment Framework created an impetus to make the cross-agency model work.

> *"There was a lot of money, shared sense of purpose and shared outcomes. We could see the challenge and opportunity to do something different." (Stakeholder interview)*

Interviewees stated that the context and incentives aligned to provide the motivation to make the cross-agency model work for J4N, but they were uncertain whether this could carry into a business-as-usual context. They noted that under normal conditions, their agencies would be likely to revert to operating within their own mandates, funding streams, and accountability structures. Without the same scale of investment, political urgency, or unifying framework, the incentives to collaborate diminish. Additionally, systemic barriers such as differing agency objectives, performance expectations, and organisational cultures, can make sustained cross-agency work difficult without compelling incentives such as the J4N investment.

The SLU Ministers' group provided a mechanism for aligning the programme across different sectors

At the Ministerial level, a SLU Ministers' group was created to oversee, make decisions, and have overall accountability for the programme (Ministry for the Environment, 2021a).[3] The SLU Ministers established the strategic principles, priorities, and overall funding phases for the programme.

Interviews with personnel from the government agencies reporting to the SLU Ministers found that there were a range of benefits associated with this collective approach. Joint decision-making at the Ministerial level enabled a holistic strategy for the programme, aligning policy and action across different sectors.

[3] The ministerial portfolios involved included Environment, Local Government, Agriculture, Biosecurity, Land Information, Forestry, Economic and Regional Development, Conservation, and Climate Change.

> *"Working and feeding up to a group of Ministers gave agencies the opportunity to showcase our work and its cross-sector benefits. We could show that if there is investment in conservation, it can have benefits for regional development, climate change, and the economy." (Stakeholder interview)*

Interviewees reported that the SLU Ministers appreciated the ability to take a system approach, leveraging the opportunities within their individual portfolios to create broader benefits for the economy and environment.

> *"With the multi-Ministers' group, we could talk about the successes of the programme as a whole and present a holistic picture. We were able to present evidence that was more than just a 'slice' of the system." (Stakeholder interview)*

Following a change of government in 2023, the Associate Minister for the Environment was delegated the role of lead Minister for the programme, replacing the SLU Ministers' group (Ministry for the Environment, 2024).

The Reference Group offered independent oversight, strategic advice, and investment assurance

A Reference Group was established to support SLU Ministers by providing independent oversight, advice, and assurance for the programme. Comprising members with expertise in environmental management, Te Ao Māori, local government, the primary sector, environmental NGOs, and crisis recovery, the group was reported to play a crucial role in the programme's development (Jobs for Nature Advisory Group, n.d.; Ministry for the Environment, n.d. (a); Ministry for the Environment, 2021a).

The Reference Group did not have decision-making powers; instead, its role centred on advising Ministers on priorities for the investment, advising on regional engagement, and supporting the inter-agency approach to ensure information on funding opportunities reached the target audiences (Jobs for Nature Advisory Group, n.d.).

A key aspect of the Reference Group's work was the creation of an Investment Framework to guide strategic funding decisions for the programme. While accountability for funding and delivery remained with Ministers and agencies, the Reference Group offered valuable insights to agencies, providing feedback on the funding allocation approach, and individual project proposals (Jobs for Nature Advisory Group, n.d.; Ministry for the Environment, 2021a).

Interviews with government agency representatives and a Reference Group member indicated that the Reference Group was instrumental in helping to maintain accountability, while allowing Ministers and agencies to focus on J4N design and delivery. Their independent advice and feedback were crucial in refining the funding allocation approach. It was reported that the group played an important role in offering feedback to agencies on larger scale projects that

required Ministerial approval, prompting agencies to consider how projects that were shortlisted for funding met the Investment Framework objectives.[4]

> *"The Reference Group asked some pretty hard questions of the agencies to keep us focused on the programme's objectives. We'd often have to do a bit more thinking before we put projects up for approval." (Stakeholder interview)*

In 2021, SLU Ministers restructured the Reference Group into an Advisory Group with a revised Terms of Reference and adjusted membership. The reframed Advisory Group provided independent advice to SLU Ministers and agencies on the programme. Its focus included facilitating regional collaboration, providing an external perspective on J4N implementation, and creating a feedback loop on project performance (Jobs for Nature Advisory Group, n.d.; Ministry for the Environment, 2021a; Ministry for the Environment, 2022a). The Advisory Group function was dissolved in 2023 following a scheduled review at the end of its second term (Ministry for the Environment, 2023a). The J4N funding had been fully allocated by this time.

The Deputy Chief Executives Group acted as the 'engine room' for establishing cross-agency collaboration

The responsibility for implementing the decisions of the Ministers during programme establishment was led by a cross-agency Chief Executives Group. This group met regularly (every fortnight during the early phases of the programme), and were tasked with establishing agency collaboration to operationalise the programme.

This group was supported by a cross-agency Deputy Chief Executives Group. Interviews with government agency personnel indicated that this group was the 'engine room' which drove the cross-agency approach, developing the systems and processes to operationalise the programme. Interviewees emphasised the importance of having people at the Deputy Chief Executive (DCE) level involved in a programme's details when establishing cross-government programmes, as this group has the authority and the access to resources needed to operationalise the joint approach.

> *"Having a DCEs group was vital, because DCEs have the ability to really drive energy at the lower levels of the organisation and push agencies to start collaborating." (Stakeholder interview)*

The Secretariat was effective in providing a cross-agency coordination function

An independent Secretariat, based at MfE, was established to facilitate cross-agency coordination. The Secretariat supported SLU Ministers, agency governance groups, and the Reference Group (later the Advisory Group), by providing programme-level briefings, data, dashboards, and insights for monitoring and decision-making (Ministry for the Environment, 2023a).

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[4] Individual agencies retained decision making autonomy for projects up to the value of $1 million, with approval from SLU Ministers required for projects over this amount.

Interviews with government agency representatives indicated that the Secretariat played a critical role in aligning agencies and ensuring they worked together effectively, mostly preventing parallel efforts and reducing duplication. This included setting up essential systems, such as the reporting framework, having a single line of communication to the SLU Ministers, and supporting agencies with specific tasks related to the programme, such as Official Information Act (OIA) requests. This coordination function was seen as beneficial in aligning the five agencies' workstreams into a cohesive programme.

> *"The Secretariat was critical to get alignment of agencies and focus. It provided ways to work well with other agencies and not crawl under each other." (Stakeholder interview)*

Several interviewees also highlighted the importance of having a dedicated Programme Director, who can focus on leading the Secretariat and cross-agency engagement.

Interagency committees strengthened the cross-agency approach

The evaluation found that an important mechanism that supported J4N programme effectiveness was the establishment of interagency committees that focused on specific aspects of the programme.

Given the high level of interest and scrutiny on large-scale funding programmes, effective risk management was crucial in maintaining J4N programme performance. The Interagency Risk Assessment Committee was established in 2022 to provide cross-agency oversight of programme risks. Supported by the Secretariat, the Interagency Risk Assessment Committee facilitated collaboration between agency risk management advisors and project leads to identify and manage the highest risks to the programme (Ministry for the Environment, 2022a; Ministry for the Environment, 2023a).

Other cross-agency committees included a Benefits Forum, which identified benefits emerging across the programme and how to consistently measure and demonstrate these (Ministry for the Environment, 2023a). A key initiative in the latter stages of the programme was a cross-agency working group focused on supporting projects to transition post-programme. This working group oversaw the development of the Programme Transition Strategy and Tūhono Taiao, the national digital platform for J4N projects to connect, share resources and practices, and increase visibility of employment and funding opportunities (Ministry for the Environment, 2023d).

Interviewees identified several benefits of the cross-agency committees established under the programme. These committees facilitated improved collaboration among personnel in a range of roles within the five agencies, allowing for the sharing of knowledge and fostering a more integrated approach to programme implementation. Regular meetings and discussions within the committees promoted transparency among agencies. Representatives from the agencies stated that they appreciated the open communication, chance to learn from their peers in similar roles, and the opportunity to provide input on various aspects of the programme.

There was mixed engagement and 'buy-in' from agencies to the cross-agency approach

The evaluation found that there was mixed engagement and buy-in from agencies to the cross-government approach. Government agency representatives described some agencies as fully committed to the cross-agency effort, driven by strong support and buy-in from all levels within the agency, including senior management, who understood and supported the joint outcomes and collective value of the programme.

However, it was reported that while the initial Ministerial direction to work across agencies provided a strong mandate and good engagement, inter-agency energy diminished as the programme transitioned into business-as-usual operations.

Some smaller agencies struggled to engage at the same level as other agencies due to limited resources. LINZ, for example, provided only 3% of the total J4N funding and had a lean team, making full engagement impractical.

Other agencies were reported to be uncertain of the benefits of the cross-agency approach, which led to challenges in achieving engagement and consistently obtaining reporting. Some stakeholders suggested that where agencies (or units within agencies) were less engaged, this may have been partly due to their J4N funding originating from an existing programme, which was then folded into J4N. For some partner agencies, participation in J4N primarily involved integrating their existing initiatives into the new framework. Having operated successfully under their established programme, these agencies may have perceived less need for the Secretariat or a cross-agency approach. Stakeholders considered that this highlights the need to consider the balance of mandating participation in cross-agency initiatives and creating buy-in through incentives.

Participation in cross-agency processes provided learning opportunities

Interviews with agency representatives found that the exchange of ideas and experiences contributed to building a more skilled and knowledgeable cross-agency workforce. Overall, stakeholders viewed the opportunity to participate in meetings, workshops, and working groups with their counterparts from other agencies as a learning opportunity.

Representatives of government agencies discussed how they had observed practices and strategies from other agencies, which they could then adapt and implement within their own agency's processes. For example, it was reported that agencies shared details of their procurement and contracting processes, leading to the adoption of innovations such as electronic reporting portals, which improved reporting efficiency. At a more strategic level, interviewees shared lessons about policy development processes, programme design, and implementation strategies. This collaborative environment allowed agencies to learn from each other's successes and challenges. For example, agency representatives discussed making changes to the procurement approaches taken to allocate funding, incorporating approaches taken by other agencies (such as an Expressions of Interest process rather than a full Request for Proposals approach) into subsequent funding rounds. By leveraging shared insights, agencies were able to refine their approaches to delivering their individual funding streams under the J4N programme.

However, some J4N stakeholders considered that there could have been opportunities to further leverage the skillsets of different agencies. While the five agencies with portfolios under the SLU Ministers' group were tasked with delivering the programme, stakeholders suggested that departments including Statistics NZ could have been used to enhance data collection and analysis. Moreover, stakeholders reported that Ministry of Social Development (MSD) could have been more effectively utilised to provide projects with support for workforce capacity building, and to help agencies gain a stronger understanding of employment support needs of affected communities.

Retaining agency autonomy to leverage expertise in their sector was important

While the J4N Cabinet Paper (Ministry for the Environment, 2020b) notes that the programme is a 'shared approach', agencies retained autonomy over their funding streams within the programme. J4N programme funding was individually appropriated to each of the five delivery agencies, and it remained the responsibility of each agency and their respective Minister to deliver its appropriation (Ministry for the Environment, 2022a). Individual agencies retained decision making autonomy for new appropriation of up to $1 million, with a higher threshold for funding arrangements that pre-existed J4N. Each agency had its own systems and processes to ensure projects achieve their intended outcomes (Ministry for the Environment, 2022a).

The retention of agency autonomy was reported to have benefits in enabling agencies to leverage their specialised knowledge, expertise and connections in their specific domain. This was seen as particularly beneficial in the early stages of the programme, whereby agencies could leverage their knowledge to expand existing projects to quickly create jobs. For example, MPI was quickly able to reframe its wilding conifers programme to align with J4N objectives and create additional employment opportunities.

Interviewees also emphasised the importance of individual agency outcomes sitting under the broader J4N objectives. For example, MfE was able to focus on improving freshwater quality and ecosystem resilience, while DOC advanced biodiversity protection and iwi-led conservation initiatives. MPI focused on sustainable land use, Kānoa maintained its focus on ensuring that local communities benefited from job creation and infrastructure investment, while LINZ maintained its land restoration objectives. This allowed each agency to pursue its core mandate while contributing to shared J4N goals, which helped agency officials and Ministers to feel a sense of ownership and accountability for their contributions to the programme. Several interviewees considered that agencies can manage their resources more efficiently when they have the autonomy to prioritise and allocate them according to their specific needs and goals.

> *"It wasn't a one-size-fits-all programme. We needed some autonomy as agencies are different and have been set up to deliver on different things." (Stakeholder interview)*

The cross-agency approach was not able to completely overcome agency silos

While agency autonomy was seen as important, some stakeholders considered that the programme was not as successful as it could have been at fostering cohesive collaboration

across agencies. A review conducted one year into programme delivery concludes that, at that point, the agencies were primarily participating in the programme independently, adhering to their own accountability measures, while operating within the common Investment Framework (RDC, 2021).

A document capturing reflections of Advisory Group members notes that, despite coordination efforts, institutional barriers remained, including Ministerial accountability, individual agency budget responsibilities and different contracting mechanisms. This created challenges in breaking down agency silos (Jobs for Nature Advisory Group, n.d.).

Government agency personnel who were involved in the cross-agency approach stated that, while the Secretariat made strides on alignment and coordination in the later stages of the J4N programme, initially there were different agency objectives, accountability measures and monitoring and reporting processes. These misalignments led to some overlapping efforts at the agency level (although there was no evidence of duplication in the delivery of the funding streams). For example, it was reported that at least one individual agency created its own benefits framework for the programme, despite the development of an overarching benefits framework.

Some interviewees considered that, particularly at the beginning, there was tension between pressures to get funding out the door and create jobs, and the need to take time to establish cross-agency relationships and processes.

> *"Agencies weren't brought together enough at the beginning, and in that early period they mostly focused on their own objectives." (Stakeholder interview)*

In addition, system barriers limited what could be achieved in terms of a fully collaborative model. For example, attempts to consolidate funding streams under the programme were unsuccessful, as Treasury does not allow for the consolidation of multiple funding categories into a single appropriation (Treasury, 2013). This meant that each category of J4N expenditure needed to be separately appropriated and managed, complicating efforts to streamline funding into a unified budget under the J4N programme.

2.1.2 Critical success factors for cross-agency collaboration

Stakeholders considered that there is potential to apply the cross-agency approach in other settings, such as programmes specifically designed for environmental outcomes or in sectors grappling with complex, multifaceted issues such as justice.

Interviews and reviews of published reports indicate that while the J4N programme cross-agency approach was mostly successful, replicating its success in other contexts will require careful consideration of the specific factors that contributed to its effectiveness. Agencies have noted that other cross-agency work programmes have not always been executed effectively, highlighting the importance of learning from past experiences and applying those lessons to future initiatives.

The evaluation evidence indicates that critical success factors for establishing a cross-agency approach are as follows.

Strong commitment from Ministers, agency leadership, and personnel at all levels is fundamental to cross-agency programme success. The establishment of structures like the SLU Ministers' group and Deputy Chief Executives Group demonstrated how leadership engagement at multiple levels creates the authority and access to resources needed to drive collaboration and push agencies to work together effectively. Success factors include securing strong mandates from Ministers that provide clear direction for cross-agency work, ensuring senior leadership buy-in that can drive energy throughout organisations, and maintaining commitment as programmes transition from high-profile launch phases into business-as-usual operations where collaborative energy can diminish.

An independent advisory or reference group provides external oversight and accountability for cross-agency programmes. The J4N Reference Group offered independent expertise and played a vital role in maintaining programme focus by asking challenging questions that kept agencies aligned with objectives. The group provided strategic advice on investment priorities, created the Investment Framework to guide funding decisions, and offered feedback on project proposals that prompted agencies to undertake additional thinking before seeking approval. Success factors include establishing the group early, ensuring diverse expertise that reflects the programme's scope, clearly defining its advisory role, and maintaining independence to provide objective oversight and challenge to agencies and Ministers

It is essential to ensure that the **incentive settings** (i.e., the policy, funding and accountability conditions that encourage collaboration) are conducive to collaboration and that agencies are motivated to work together towards common goals. The success of the J4N programme was driven by unique circumstances, including the context of COVID-19 and substantial investment funding, which created the right incentives for cross-government collaboration. Ensuring that the incentive settings are appropriate is crucial for encouraging participation and commitment from all agencies involved. Balancing incentives with mandates or directives is crucial to foster genuine engagement and collaboration across all agencies.

It is important to recognise agencies' individual priorities, while leveraging agency expertise. Cross-agency initiatives must acknowledge that agencies are set up to deliver on different objectives and still need to meet their individual priorities. While an overarching strategic approach is important, allowing agencies to retain autonomy over their investments ensures that they can contribute to shared goals without compromising their core missions. This balance of autonomy and collective contribution is vital for effective cross-agency collaboration.

A secretariat function is essential for aligning agencies and maintaining focus. A secretariat provides a single line of communication to Ministers, establishes the programme's purpose, structure, and frameworks, and offers a crucial mechanism for coordination between agencies. This helps minimise duplication, provides necessary expertise such as evaluation capability and benefits realisation, and manages practical issues like responses to OIA requests. Success factors include ensuring that the secretariat function is in place from the beginning, has a defined role, and is adequately resourced.

By focusing on these critical success factors, future cross-agency initiatives can be well positioned to achieve their objectives and foster effective collaboration across government entities.

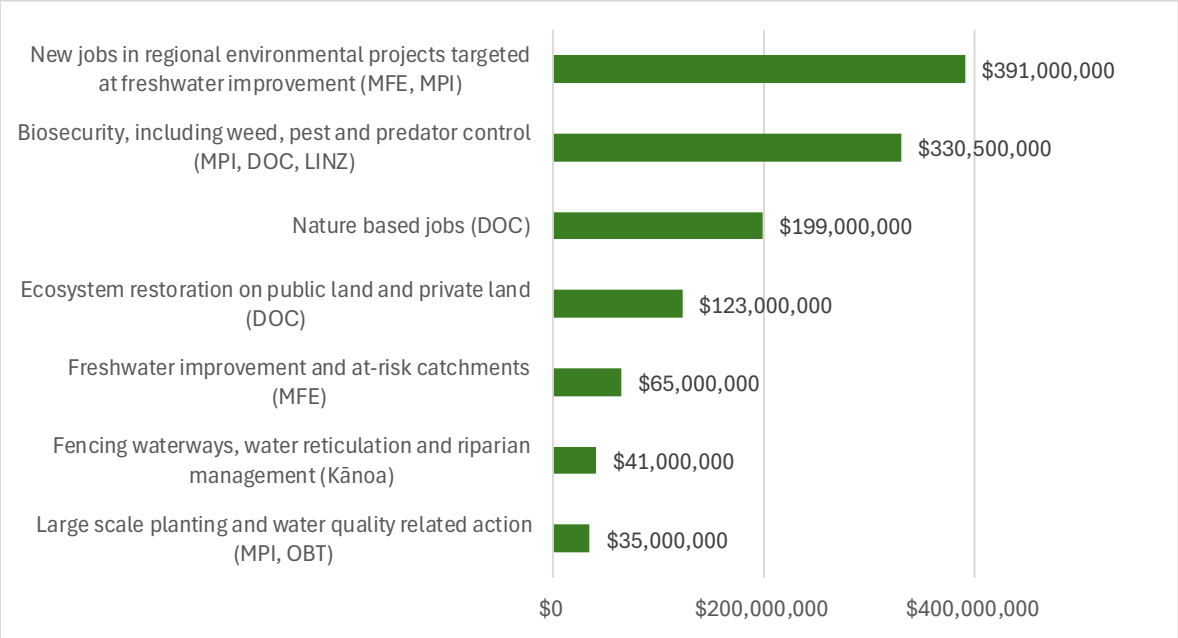
2.2 Procurement and contracting approach

The J4N programme required the procurement of services to deliver employment and environmental outcomes. This included funding totalling $1.185 billion. Of this, almost $0.5 billion was allocated to quick-start projects or was tagged to existing programmes with established governance and decision-making structures. This included $100 million for the National Wilding Conifer Control Programme, the reallocation of $41 million of Provincial Growth Fund (PGF) funding to riparian fencing, reticulated stock water systems, and riparian planting, and $35 million for environmental projects such as on highly erodible land or riparian areas under the One Billion Trees (OBT) programme.

The remaining funding of around $0.7 billion was made available for projects that were still developing, and had yet to fully establish decision-making, governance and delivery processes. Some of the funding was intended for quick-start projects, and some was intended to be allocated in a second phase of funding from July 2020, and over a third phase in 2021 and beyond.

Jobs for Nature investments (Figure 3) shows the distribution of J4N funding across the investment package.

Figure 3: Jobs for Nature investments



Source: https://www.jobsfornature.govt.nz/about-jobs-for-nature/funding-allocation/

2.2.1 Effectiveness of J4N procurement approach

Each of the five agencies was responsible for procurement and contracting within their separate funding streams. Although the original Cabinet paper indicated a possibility of joint procurement, the programme budget was split across the agencies, through 25 separate funds (Jobs for Nature Reference Group, n.d.).

The programme-wide approach to procurement was bounded by the Investment Framework, developed by the programme Reference Group, which provided high-level guidance across the funds (Jobs for Nature Reference Group, n.d.; Ministry for the Environment, 2023c). This outlined the funding areas that were covered by the programme, and assessment principles related to employment and the environment.[5,6] The procurement approach also needed to consider the Investment Framework's principles of organisation and partnership and financial and delivery.[7,8] Within these parameters, the five agencies were able to determine the approach to procurement that worked best for them. A range of procurement approaches were adopted across the programme, which evolved over time. These are discussed below.

Procurement initially focused on getting funds out quickly by accelerating existing programmes and initiatives

The context of the pandemic and the urgency to establish the programme quickly meant that in the initial phases, agencies were unable to use their standard procurement models, such as contestable funding rounds. During the early stages of the programme, agencies focused on accelerating or scaling up initiatives that existed prior to J4N, which enabled the rapid allocation of funds and creation of jobs. These projects generally had existing data or models on the scale of the problem they aimed to address, could estimate the number of jobs that would be created through additional investment, and could identify the environmental impacts that could be accelerated.

For example, the MPI investment in wilding conifer control was rapidly scaled up. A strategy for the control of wilding conifers had been in place prior to J4N and had attracted government investment (Ministry for Primary Industries, 2014).[9] Substantial additional investment was made in 2020 with $100 million committed over four years under the J4N programme. This enabled the expansion of the wilding conifer control programme to focus on job creation in

[5] Principles included addressing immediate unemployment, creating enduring careers to fill capacity gaps, supporting employees of distressed businesses; tackling employment disparities for youth and Māori; and providing training and capability building within projects or through dedicated funding.
[6] Principles included targeting projects based on a holistic system-view of catchments and ecosystems, focus on interventions with broad environmental impacts, and fit within regional strategies; projects that create enduring outcomes; projects that are linked to long-term monitoring; and projects that enhance knowledge and trial innovative approaches.
[7] Principles included funding projects that build delivery partnerships between central and local government and iwi/hapū/whānau, increase partnerships with Māori and provide leadership opportunities, enhance community and private sector involvement in environmental projects, and align with the capabilities of funding recipients.
[8] Principles included co-funding, value for money, regional equity, appropriate monitoring, phased funding, and agility for project pivots.
[9] In 2016, the government pledged $16 million over 4 years, and in 2019, a further $21 million was allocated over 2 years.

regions that were hit hard economically by COVID-19 (Ministry for Primary Industries, 2021; Sapere, 2023). A representative from MPI stated that focusing the procurement approach on this existing initiative enabled the investment to be backed by robust evidence and existing business intelligence.

> *"We had been seeking additional funding for wilding conifers long before Jobs for Nature. We knew what investment was needed to turn the issue around, and we already had a business case." (Stakeholder interview)*

Scaling up this existing programme enabled fast job creation, with the procurement having created over 1500 employment starts by June 2022 through the redeployment of forestry workers to wilding conifer control as the forestry supply chain was shut down due to ports closing (Ministry of the Environment, 2023c).

Other agencies took a similar approach to procurement for some of their funding streams. MfE undertook a closed contestable funding round with local government under its Public Waterways and Ecosystem Restoration Fund. This was intended to expand existing environmental programmes aligned with its Essential Freshwater Reforms priorities, such as planting and fencing, wastewater and stormwater improvements, and fish passage initiatives. J4N funding was also used to expand the existing LINZ biosecurity programme to manage pests and weeds on lands and waterways that the agency is responsible for (Land Information New Zealand, 2023).

The evaluation evidence indicates that this approach worked well because it allowed agencies to build on existing project concepts and evidence, ensuring that the projects could be accelerated swiftly and effectively. Leveraging pre-existing data, models, and business cases to demonstrate potential impact facilitated quick decision-making while providing a degree of confidence in the anticipated outcomes.

The procurement approach increased funding to established partners with a strong track record

As well as scaling government initiatives, agencies took a procurement approach that drew on their existing knowledge and relationships (Ministry for the Environment, 2023c). Agency representatives stated that they typically looked to organisations that they had a current or past contracting relationship with, and could leverage these relationships to create nature-based jobs.

Government agency representatives stated that they sought out organisations that had established infrastructure and financial capability, including iwi and hapū that had received Treaty settlements and had established offices and staffing structures, regional councils, and long-standing NGOs. For example, DOC was able to draw on established relationships with trusted partners delivering freshwater restoration and biodiversity improvement projects to identify 'shovel ready' projects that could come under the J4N programme. Other organisations with a strong track record received J4N investment to expand work programmes, such as Save the Kiwi, which received funding to expand the area of kiwi-safe habitat (Save the Kiwi, 2021). These projects were able to rapidly generate employment by

using established management structures, including contract management, governance, and approval processes (Ministry for the Environment, 2023c).

The context of the pandemic and the need to rapidly create jobs meant that these contracts were arranged using a streamlined procurement approach.

> *"We were open to doing procurement differently. If we applied our usually processes, it would have taken much too long. It wasn't our usual situation, so were much more creative about how was approached the programme." (Stakeholder interview)*

Agencies adopted a flexible approach, deviating from usual procurement processes to expedite the programme. This included 'shoulder tapping' entities with an existing track record or running a truncated expressions of interest process. While the funding approach remained contestable and proposals were sought, these were typically abbreviated, often presented as spreadsheets or short summaries of relevant information.

Agencies with representatives in regions, including DOC and Kānoa, utilised their regional workforce to undertake due diligence, such as holding discussions with personnel from proposed projects to ensure they were viable and aligned with programme goals.

> *"It wasn't a traditional funding approach. We were trying to get things out at the speed of light. We used a high trust model with our regional people doing due diligence on the ground." (Stakeholder interview)*

As discussed in section 2.3, DOC used Regional Partnership Groups to assess expressions of interest, drawing on local knowledge and existing relationships to expedite funding decisions. This hands-on approach allowed for an efficient evaluation process, leveraging local knowledge to quickly identify suitable projects.

The change in emphasis to environmental outcomes enabled agencies to take a social procurement approach

The initial focus of the programme was on job creation, in line with Treasury's April 2020 forecasts that unemployment would peak between 13% and 26%. After an initial increase, the national unemployment rate peaked at 5.3% in the September 2020 quarter. In response to the lower than anticipated unemployment, in May 2021, the SLU Ministers directed that for the remaining unallocated funding, greater emphasis should be placed on environmental outcomes relative to employment objectives (Ministry for the Environment, 2021a).

Agency representatives, particularly from DOC, Kānoa and LINZ discussed how the shift in focus supported the use of social procurement methods for contracting. This placed greater weighting on proposals that supported social and community benefits alongside environmental outcomes, such as using local suppliers, embedding pastoral care, and providing training for employees. For example, Kānoa reported adopting a social procurement approach, which involved selecting projects that included the provision of broader support, such as supporting people to get their driver's license; and providing career development to people who were unemployed and under skilled. The investment in career development gave people a skill set

which is expected to help them beyond the lifetime of the programme (Allen and Clarke, 2023a).

Kānoa's social procurement approach also involved requiring contracted entities to support local businesses. A Kānoa representative discussed how funding to regional councils came with a directive to work with local contractors. Project case studies show that some projects took a 'local first' approach to selecting their suppliers, such as Kaipara Moana Remediation, which supported 28 locally contracted businesses and 19 nurseries in rural and remote areas (Ministry for the Environment, 2025a).

Representatives from DOC and LINZ also reported that social procurement methods for contracting were used to support increasing iwi capacity and capability. This often included procuring training and development programmes as part of the contract.

The social procurement approach involved contracting new and less established organisations. While this had the potential for long term capacity development benefits (as discussed in section 2.3), a reported trade-off of this approach was the increased overhead associated with managing numerous small projects. This included dealing with the lack of capacity or experience among some recipients, which added complexity and required more intensive management efforts (Ministry for the Environment, 2023c). Representatives from agencies that had taken this approach described needing to provide support to organisations to meet health and safety requirements, ensure compliance with regulatory standards, and meet reporting requirements.

> *"We were working with groups that didn't have a lot of experience or track record with government funding. They needed a lot more contract management, more oversight at each step, to meet the standard needed for work for government agency." (Stakeholder interview)*

Contestable funding remained a feature of procurement, with adjustments made to take feedback into account

Contestable funding remained a feature of the J4N procurement approach, particularly from the second year of the programme. It was reported that the contestable funds were in high demand. MfE's contestable funds experienced significant oversubscription, with the Partnership with Environment and Regional Development fund attracting applications twelve times greater than available funding through its Expression of Interest process, while the Freshwater Improvement Fund saw demand exceed available funding by four times in Round 3 and fifteen times in Round 2. Similarly, DOC's four contestable funds received formal applications totalling approximately $800 million against $258 million in available funding; about three times the available budget. In some cases, applicants were directed to alternative funding sources, but the overall demand for investment far exceeded the available J4N allocation (Ministry for the Environment, 2023c).

Agencies refined their contestable funding approaches to consider feedback received on the application process. For example, early rounds of MfE's Freshwater Improvement Fund procurement used a general contestable approach, which required a lengthy written application (Ministry of the Environment, 2021c). While this was reported as successful in

procuring high quality projects, government agency representatives described it as an onerous process. Applicants provided feedback that it was overly time-consuming and resource-intensive, particularly for community groups. For subsequent rounds, the procurement process involved submitting a brief Expression of Interest (EOI) document, which provided high-level information about the proposed project. The top-rated EOIs were then invited to submit a full application, with these applicants receiving up to $10,000 in support to cover costs such as consultant fees and planning expenses. This revised process was well-received by those who applied for the fund. It reduced the effort required for the initial application and increased the likelihood of funding for those progressing to the full application stage (Ministry for the Environment, 2023c; Ministry for the Environment, 2025c).

2.2.2 Effectiveness of J4N contracting

Contracting was not well aligned between agencies

The evaluation found that agencies did not have well aligned contracting models. Particularly in the early stages of the programme, each agency ran their own contracting model. It was reported that there were some key areas of misalignment, such as different reporting requirements, and different payment models (some agencies paid in advance, others in arrears). This reportedly caused confusion, issues with cashflow, and high compliance costs when funded organisations had a range of J4N contracts with different agencies (Allen and Clarke 2023a; Jobs for Nature Advisory Group, n.d.).

While there were some examples of joint projects, for example between Kānoa and Te Uru Rākau – New Zealand Forest Service, these still involved separate contracts with each agency (Ministry for the Environment, 2023c).

In the second year of the programme there was an attempt to streamline contracting requirements across several of the agencies (Ministry for the Environment, 2023c). Agency representatives that were involved in this process stated that discussions were held about aligning and simplifying contracting processes, and that fund managers within agencies had been open to this. However, there were insurmountable barriers within agencies due to legal requirements and other administrative system and process barriers (Ministry for the Environment, 2023c).

> *"This was an instance where the cross-agency model got in the way, and we heard that the different requirements from agency legal teams were not able to be overcome – which put the kibosh on contract alignment attempts." (Stakeholder interview)*

There was a need to renegotiate contracts during the programme to respond to changing contexts

Government agency representatives described how the speed of procurement and contracting during the early phases of the programme led to some projects being developed hastily. It was reported that some projects were not well estimated, and it became apparent that some contract pricing was initially under-costed. This was compounded by rising inflation, which

pushed up the cost of materials such as fuel, and supply chain disruptions (such as for fencing materials) resulting from COVID-19 restrictions (Ministry for the Environment, 2022a).

The tighter than expected employment market also meant that some projects struggled to meet their contracted job creation targets (Allen and Clarke, 2023a). In addition, some projects experienced a lag in expected delivery timeframes as they set up the necessary structures and filled project roles before being in a position to deliver contracted outcomes (Allen and Clarke, 2024a). These factors resulted in the need to renegotiate some contracts (Ministry for the Environment, 2023c).

The evaluation found mixed success in adjusting contracts. Some projects had planned for inflation, and some agencies used a multi-year contracting approach with annual reviews and planning to allow for adjustments; many others were able to renegotiate their contract easily and secure necessary adjustments. However, other projects reported difficulties achieving adequate contract variations to cover increases in the cost of materials and equipment needed to carry out environmental restoration activities. Project personnel also reported challenges in adjusting contracted outputs related to job creation when it became clear that employment targets were too high (Allen and Clarke, 2023a).

There were inherent tensions between good governance practice and delivery pressures

A small number of stakeholders considered that the contracting model used in the programme faced a tension between maintaining good governance and ensuring timely delivery. For example, a funding stream might initially focus on flood resilience but later discovered the need to redirect funding to other environmental protection initiatives. However, due to pre-signed contracts, such changes were not feasible. It was reported that lack of flexibility limited the ability of the programme to evolve as new needs emerged.

These stakeholders considered that good governance would ideally involve continuous improvement and adaptation over time. However, the urgency to deliver outputs within a specific timeframe overshadowed this principle. It was noted that this tension is not unique to the J4N programme, but is a common challenge in multi-year government initiatives, where the balance between strict adherence to initial plans and the need for adaptive management is crucial.

2.2.3 Critical success factors for procurement and contracting

Based on the data collected in this evaluation, the following features have been identified as critical success factors for procurement and contracting in large scale, cross-agency initiatives.

A **robust business case** is an essential component of procurement, regardless of the context. This provides a clear rationale for the project, outlining the expected benefits, costs, and risks, ensuring that all stakeholders have a shared understanding of the project's objectives and the resources required to achieve them. The business case should include a detailed analysis of the project's feasibility, including financial projections, risk assessments, and potential impacts.

Social procurement offers significant benefits in building capacity and capability, particularly for iwi and local businesses. By prioritising contracts with these groups, government programmes can promote economic development and social and wellbeing outcomes. However, social procurement requires investment in support and active contract management. This includes providing training and resources to help these organisations meet contract requirements, as well as ongoing support to address any challenges that arise during project implementation. Without adequate support, smaller or less experienced organisations may struggle to deliver on their contracts, leading to delays and increased costs. Therefore, it is crucial to have mechanisms in place to provide the necessary assistance and oversight to ensure successful project outcomes.

Alignment of the contracting approach is vital for cross-agency initiatives. Different agencies often have their own processes and priorities, which can lead to inconsistencies and inefficiencies if not properly coordinated. A unified contracting approach ensures that all participating agencies are working towards the same goals and using compatible methods. This includes standardising contract terms, performance metrics, and reporting requirements to facilitate collaboration and streamline project management.

2.3 Regional arrangements

Regional Partnership Groups were an innovative approach that DOC sought to establish as part of the J4N programme (RDC Group, 2021). Interviews with DOC personnel indicated that the groups aimed to create a unified vision at the regional level, with collaborative efforts from various stakeholders working towards a common goal. Recognising that no single entity could achieve the desired outcomes alone, DOC emphasised the importance of collaboration, with all key players contributing towards a cohesive effort to address environmental challenges and promote sustainable investment.

2.3.1 Effectiveness of regional arrangements

The development of regional groups drew on existing structures where possible

DOC regional Operations Directors were tasked with facilitating the establishment of regional groups. Where possible, they drew on existing entities such as the Kotahitanga mō te Taiao alliance in Te Tau Ihu/top of the South Island. This approach aligns with suggestions from members of the J4N Advisory Group, who emphasised that government should focus on empowering existing entities and groups that are already working or aspire to work in nature (Jobs for Nature Advisory Group, n.d.).

Other regions needed to establish regional groups in areas without existing structures, and interviewees noted the pressures associated with putting together a group, allowing time for relationship building between members, establishing coordination and administration processes, and ensuring that all members aligned with the group's objectives and goals. DOC personnel who were involved in establishing regional groups reflected that it required significant time and effort to foster trust, mutual understanding, and effective collaboration among the members, and that this did not always align with the timeframes available to establish the Regional Partnership Groups.

Ensuring the involvement of key regional entities, including regional councils and iwi, was critical to regional groups' success

The evaluation found that ensuring all relevant stakeholders were represented in the Regional Partnership Groups was vital but presented a challenge in areas where there were not pre-existing entities. The groups typically composed of iwi representatives, regional council, the regional public service commissioner, central government representatives at the regional level (particularly from LINZ, and DOC), local government and key NGOs.

Interviews with regional DOC personnel and members of the Regional Partnership Groups emphasised that the involvement of regional councils was crucial in guiding the direction of these groups, ensuring effective coordination and alignment with regional resource and environmental strategies. Relationships with regional councils were important to understand which initiatives could be enhanced to achieve the greatest environmental impact. These relationships helped identify how potential projects aligned with existing regional policies, such as freshwater strategies, and pinpointed the areas that would benefit most from environmental improvements. This intelligence was instrumental in informing funding discussions, ensuring that investments were strategically directed to maximise environmental benefits and align with regional priorities.

The involvement of iwi was also described as important. Ensuring appropriate iwi representation was challenging in regions where there are multiple iwi and hapū, making it difficult to assemble a small representative roopū. Given the diverse interests of iwi and hapū, several interviewees had initially believed that the likelihood of achieving this was extremely low. However, the broader context of the COVID-19 pandemic was reported to incentivise iwi to create entities such as regional iwi clusters and coalitions. These groups provided representatives to engage in regional groups addressing COVID-19's social, health, and economic impacts. For example, in Te Tai Tokerau/Northland a collective representing eleven iwi, known as Te Kahu o Taonui, was established to support local whānau and communities during the COVID-19 crisis (Te Puni Kokiri, 2020). The DOC office in Te Tai Tokerau drew on this iwi collective to provide a representative for the J4N Regional Partnership Group.

Some stakeholders described challenges related to the limited timeframe available establishing trust among group members. In particular, building trust with iwi required time that was not available in the context of the pandemic. For example, the Year 1 evaluation found that in the Manawatū-Whanganui region, the five iwi organisations interviewed considered local and regional councils as too siloed in their practice (Allen and Clarke, 2023a).

Regional groups used their local knowledge and insights to advise on DOC J4N investment in the regions

Once established, the Regional Partnership Groups considered applications for J4N funding under the DOC appropriation and made funding recommendations based on the proposed project's alignment with region-specific priorities, under the overarching J4N Investment Framework.

Discussions with DOC personnel revealed that the original intention was to allocate investment decision-making powers to the regional groups. However, further investigation identified that

devolving funding responsibility would mean that accountability and risk sat with these groups, rather than the Crown. It was therefore decided to adopt a different model, under which the regional groups would provide funding recommendations rather than making final investment decisions.

This approach allowed the regional groups to leverage their local knowledge and insights while ensuring that risk management remained with DOC. Key strengths included the ability to utilise group members' expertise to identify where the economic impacts of COVID-19 were most likely to be felt within the region. This local knowledge was crucial in directing J4N investment to areas where it could most effectively meet job creation objectives.

> *"Our members had a good understanding of the impact of COVID, and brought socio-economic thinking into the roopū's discussions to identify where employment loss would be most keenly felt, where we should invest, and who to invite to bring ideas to the table." (Stakeholder interview)*

The regional approach allowed for coherent investment across the region

Interviews with DOC personnel and members of Regional Partnership Groups indicated that the groups mostly functioned effectively. A key advantage of the regional approach was the ability to take a holistic approach to investment across the region, enabling coordinated funding for restoration at a regional scale.

Data collected during the Year 1 evaluation found that cross-project coherence at the regional level was strong in areas with a pre-existing regional entity. For example, the Kotahitanga mō te Taiao in Te Tau Ihu/top of the South Island created a collaborative environment. Interviewees in this region stated that the collective regional approach to selecting projects to recommend for funding resulted in synergies between projects, reducing the risk of duplication, and enhancing the overall effectiveness of the programme in this region (Allen and Clarke, 2023c). The J4N programme provided funding to accelerate existing projects that had been identified as regional priorities in the *Kotahitanga mō Te Taiao Strategy* (Kotahitanga mō Te Taiao, 2019). For example, the J4N funding was used to undertake work in the Te Hoiere/Pelorus River catchment, and the regionally coherent approach to funding enabled environmental work 'from mountains to sea', with pooling of resources and expertise to deliver on a shared vision and measurable targets (Te Hoiere/Pelorus Catchment Restoration Project, 2021).

In contrast, regions that did not have pre-existing groups reported more challenges operationalising the regional approach. It was reported that without a pre-existing regional framework on which to base discussions about the J4N investment, the process of identifying and prioritising projects was more fragmented. The lack of a unified strategy made it harder to achieve the same level of synergy and collective impact seen in regions with established regional entities.

Relationships formed through the regional groups have been leveraged for other collaborations

While some stakeholders reported optimism that regional groups might continue post-programme, the majority are no longer meeting. However, it was noted that the relationships formed through the Regional Partnership Groups have built a strong foundation for sustained collaboration (Ministry for the Environment, 2022a). Stakeholders stated that there were ongoing collaborative projects between central government, regional councils, and iwi that had been supported by connections developed through the regional partnership.

The groups which have endured are those that pre-existed prior to the J4N programme. Some representatives from government departments and regions noted that without the ongoing incentives of the need to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the large amount of funding available, it was difficult to retain the impetus for continued engagement.

> *"There has always been a desire to connect at a regional level, but [stakeholders] weren't interested in a government talk fest. [The reason] why the J4N roopū was successful is investment. It had a collective pool of resource to be able to invest there." (Stakeholder interviews)*

Stakeholders that had been involved with regional groups reflected that the success of the Kotahitanga mō Te Taiao alliance demonstrates that pre-existing, self-determined models appear to be more effective in fostering long-term collaboration and achieving regional goals. Attempting to set up collaborative structures in response to urgent situations, such as the arrival of significant funding or crises like COVID-19, can be challenging and less effective than leveraging already-established groups and entities.

2.3.2 Critical success factors for a regional approach

The evaluation found that the following factors are important when establishing a regionally based approach to programme oversight and/or delivery.

Establishing the right **incentive settings** is crucial for the success of a regional approach, ensuring that stakeholders are motivated to participate and contribute effectively. As discussed above, without the ongoing incentives of the need to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the large amount of funding available, it was difficult to retain the impetus for continued engagement. To incentivise stakeholders, it is essential to provide clear reasons for them to join, such as the availability of funding to distribute and the potential for impactful outcomes.

Building on existing groups or supporting them to emerge organically, rather than being government-led, can enhance the effectiveness of regional groups. By leveraging existing networks and supporting their organic growth, regional groups can build on established trust and local knowledge, and be prepared to respond to future crises or funding opportunities.

Ensuring **representative stakeholder participation** is vital to the legitimacy and effectiveness of regional groups. Having the right mix of stakeholders, including iwi representatives, regional councils, central government agencies, and key NGOs was crucial.

Building trust with diverse stakeholders, particularly iwi, requires time and dedicated effort that must be factored into programme planning.

Investing **adequate resources into the functioning of regional groups** is fundamental to their success. This includes funding for coordination, such as a secretariat function. Ensuring that regional groups have the necessary resources to operate smoothly allows them to focus on their core mission and maintain momentum.

2.4 Capacity building

Building nature-based workforce capacity was part of the J4N programme, and the evidence indicates it was one of the key successes of the programme. The Investment Framework includes an assessment principle that investment should be targeted to 'training and capability building either within projects or dedicated funding' (Jobs for Nature Reference Group, n.d.).

In particular, capacity building was reported to be a key focus for DOC, which had identified the need to build a larger conservation workforce prior to the pandemic. Representatives from DOC noted that it was a core part of the agency's strategy for its J4N investment.

> *"We wanted to support communities hurting due to COVID, but it also had to have a legacy, not just a lolly scramble. That was where capacity building for the longer term came in." (Stakeholder interview)*

2.4.1 Effectiveness of capacity building processes

The initial priority was job creation

An initial priority for J4N was job creation. This priority was driven by forecasts that indicated unemployment rates could increase to 10% during 2020 (Ministry for the Environment, 2021a). As a result, many J4N projects funded in the early phase of implementation supported immediate workforce needs.

In response to the need to rapidly generate capacity, the programme focused on funding projects that could be initiated quickly and create immediate job opportunities. Stakeholders involved in the early stages of the programme reported that these jobs primarily did not require extensive skillset development, which allowed for rapid deployment of the workforce. Examples of such jobs included wilding conifer control, trapping, and track maintenance. According to a representative from a government agency, some of these projects engaged individuals who were unable to work in their usual fields (such as tourism) due to the pandemic, but possessed skills that were relevant to nature-based work. In areas such as South Westland, the DOC allocation of programme funding had a specific focus on sustaining regional communities and businesses through providing employment opportunities for businesses and their employees across a range of conservation and recreation projects (Allen and Clarke, 2023e). This strategic tourism-conservation employee sharing approach facilitated targeted redeployment of workers, such as rafting tour guides who were unable to work while borders were closed, into environmental conservation projects. This approach not only provided immediate employment opportunities but also leveraged the existing skills of the workforce.

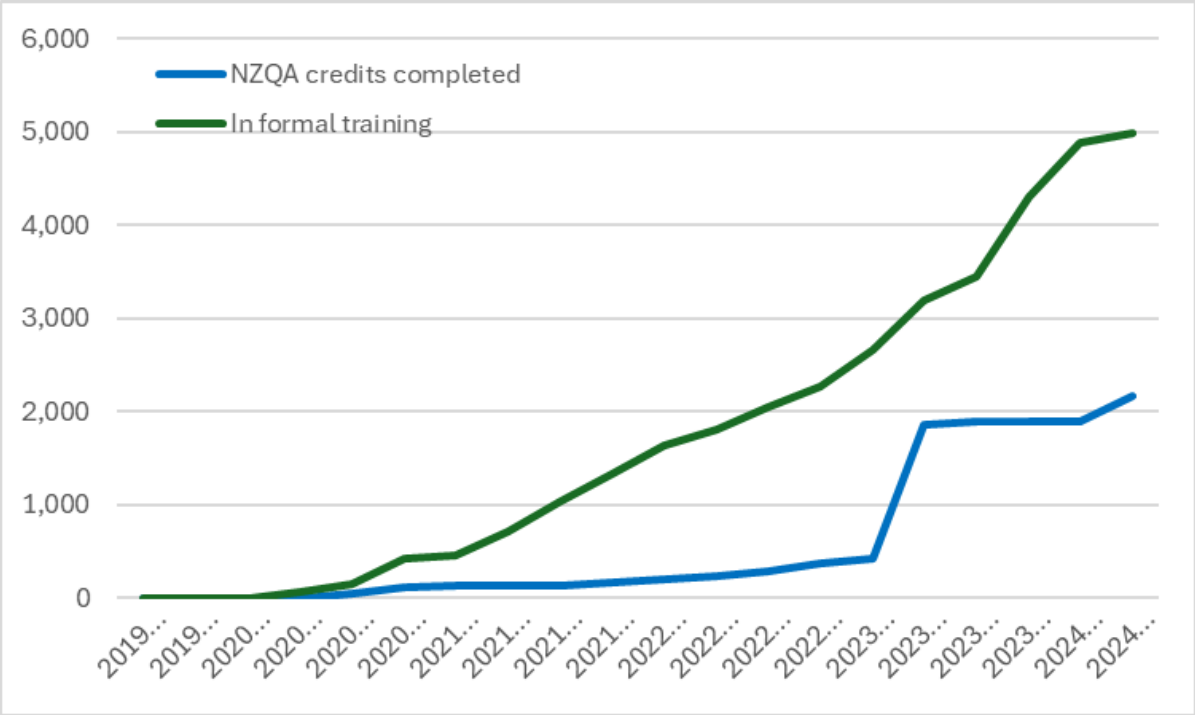
Stakeholder interviews indicated that this approach had short-term benefits: more people were exposed to conservation work and learned new skills, albeit often in entry-level tasks. These projects effectively supported individuals who were out of work, particularly those affected by the pandemic.

Investing in longer-term skill development was a priority in the latter stages of J4N

Interviewees noted that there was a need to enhance capacity to undertake specialist tasks, which would be needed to ensure a sustainable and skilled workforce for future environmental restoration efforts. Investment in longer-term skill development became a higher priority for J4N after June 2021 (Ministry for the Environment, 2021a). By then it was apparent unemployment figures were not as severe as expected. Even so, the number of people on main benefits (such as the Jobseeker support) and underutilisation statistics (which capture people working fewer hours than desired or available to work but not actively seeking employment) remained higher than the pre-COVID-19 level (Ministry for the Environment, 2021a). With this in mind, the SLU Ministers directed that there should be a greater focus on building capability and capacity of people, to improve long-term job prospects and fill environmental management skills gaps (Ministry for the Environment, 2021a). In response, investment criteria for several programme funds were redesigned to focus on long-term capability building and decisions were made to not fund projects geared towards short-term employment (Ministry for the Environment, 2023c). Following the Ministers' directive to pivot toward long-term capacity building, agencies gave greater weight to projects with skills and training components in areas with high social need (Ministry for the Environment, 2023c). This shift included funding projects that included recruited participants into roles with career development potential, such as land management advisors and planners. The Secretariat's 2023 annual review notes that this approach has the potential to better address long-term needs within the environmental sector, providing sustainability of employment (Ministry for the Environment, 2023a).

The data reflects this shift in emphasis. Almost 70% (359) of J4N projects reported a capability development objective. Administrative data indicates that as at December 2024 almost 5,000 people received formal training through J4N projects, and just over 2,000 NZQA credits were earned (Figure 4). The amount of formal training delivered increased substantially from 2021.

Figure 4: Number of reported NZQA credits and people in formal training under the J4N programme



The regional distribution of training and qualifications, shown in Figure 4, suggests that some regions were more active than others in supporting kaimahi through training and education (or at least more active in reporting on training). The substantial training and qualifications delivered in the Bay of Plenty, Tairāwhiti, West Coast, and Northland indicates that environmental restoration capacity has been built in these regions. This is likely to support future needs in these regions. For example, investment in nature-based workforce capacity may support the West Coast's shift away from extractive industries (such as mining) to other economic opportunities including nature-based tourism. The capacity building in Tairāwhiti may help to address environmental restoration requirements following extreme weather events and support future climate change resilience.

Table 1: Regional distribution of number of people who completed formal training and number of NZQA credits, to December 2024

Region	Cumulative as at Dec 2024	
	Number of people who completed formal training	Number of NZQA credits earned
Nationwide	661	
Auckland	48	
Bay of Plenty	393	1822
Canterbury	62	57
Chatham Islands	10	
Gisborne/Tairāwhiti	167	33
Hawke's Bay	50	

Region	Cumulative as at Dec 2024	
	Number of people who completed formal training	Number of NZQA credits earned
Manawatū-Whanganui	68	54
Marlborough		
Northland	97	30
Otago	9	78
Southland		
Taranaki	7	30
Tasman-Nelson	43	
Waikato	28	56
Wellington	69	
West Coast	177	
Total	**1,889**	**2160**

Further, a survey of J4N employers identified that two thirds (68%) had facilitated their workers to get formal qualifications, and most (84%) had offered workers additional training such as chainsaw, pest and plant management, health and safety, four-wheel driving and first aid (Ministry for the Environment, 2023b).[10]

Capacity building was delivered at scale through projects such as Kaipara Moana Remediation, which supported the development of nearly 60 field advisors to gain qualifications in freshwater farm planning. It was reported that the training has grown a network of rural professionals who are now equipped to address the environmental challenges of the Kaipara Moana catchment (Ministry for the Environment, 2025a).

Interviews with government agency representatives indicated that they attempted to take a strategic focus to build capacity to fill skill shortages. This was considered at a national level; for example, it was reported that there was a need to increase capability to implement freshwater improvement activities. J4N funding through the MfE Essential Freshwater Fund, which supports waterway restoration and protection, was seen as a lever to build this capability for the long term. Website materials on this fund notes that it prioritises projects that improve capability and capacity within the freshwater management system. This includes upskilling, training and providing information and tools for community groups, tangata whenua, regional and unitary councils and rural advisory businesses.

Other strategic approaches to capacity building efforts focused on directing investment towards catchment community groups. Investment in these groups, consisting of landowners and farmers, regional councils, hapū and iwi, and environmental and community organisations, was intended to enhance landowner and community capacity to undertake

[10] 80 employers from a potential 381 projects responded (21% response rate).

activities such as water quality improvement, sedimentation management, and biodiversity conservation (Allen and Clarke, 2024c).

> *"These community groups are a prime example of building capability, as they are designed to be enduring and continue to contribute to environmental management over the long term." (Stakeholder interview)*

Capacity built through J4N has benefited communities through responding to extreme weather events

The practical skills developed through J4N were able to be deployed to support community recovery from climate change related events (Allen and Clarke, 2024e). The Year 2 evaluation report (Allen and Clarke, 2024a) noted that skills related to chainsaw use and four-wheel driving proved useful during Cyclone Gabrielle. This demonstrates the dual benefit of environmental workforce development for both restoration and response to community needs during emergencies.

> *"Jobs for Nature crews featured heavily in flood-stricken areas, providing civil defence [and] much needed help in clearing trees and rebuilding fences." (J4N Project Manager, quoted in Allen and Clarke, 2024a)*

These skills, originally developed for conservation work such as vegetation management and accessing remote restoration sites, highlight how environmental restoration capacity was able to be redeployed to wider community benefit.

Ongoing employment opportunities for iwi and hapū to live and work on their whenua leveraged capacity built through J4N into business-as-usual

Evidence from multiple data sources indicates that skills learnt as part of J4N created ongoing employment opportunities and enabled iwi and hapū to live and work on their whenua. Iwi, hapū, and other Māori organisations implemented restoration activities, including on land returned through Treaty settlements. In the process, iwi and hapū members gained qualifications, which will support Māori in continuing to exercise autonomy and self-determination in addressing long-term environmental challenges (Ministry for the Environment, 2023b).

> *"We leaned into iwi-led projects. Iwi have built capacity and also led thinking around transition to their business-as-usual, such as by developing taiao units." (Stakeholder interview)*

In Northland, some of the field advisors trained as part of the Kaipara Moana Remediation project are tāngata whenua who are working with their iwi and hapū on sediment reduction plans and associated projects (Ministry for the Environment, 2025a).

It was reported that another project focused on developing the technical capacity of their iwi team. Their priority was to upskill their people to deliver the range of services required to maintain their lakes. This included developing skills in scientific monitoring, licensing, biosecurity management, weed and pest control, planting, and restoration. Iwi team members are now involved in maintaining lake health, including killing lake weeds, monitoring the health

of native species, and education work with schools and the public. The project worked with the regional and local councils, delivering services that were cost effective and of high quality. Both councils now recognise the value of maintaining all their contracts for the lakes with the J4N iwi project team because of the professionalism of the delivered services (Allen and Clarke, 2023d).

2.4.2 Critical success factors for capacity building

Ensuring projects contribute to building sustainable capacity can be supported by **embedding formal training and qualifications into the application requirements**. These qualifications ensure that individuals possess the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively contribute to and manage environmental projects. By setting clear qualification standards and providing access to accredited training courses, organisations can ensure that their workforce is well-prepared to meet the challenges of environmental management. Additionally, formal qualifications can enhance the credibility and professionalism of the workforce.

Another factor is the **establishment of strong partnerships with iwi, hapū and Māori**, which play a crucial role in long-term nature-based capacity building. Capacity building was reported to be most effective when projects are Māori-led, with the government providing funding and support while allowing autonomous management by iwi. This approach respects the knowledge and expertise of Māori communities, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility. Government agencies can support these efforts by facilitating access to resources and removing bureaucratic barriers, thereby enabling iwi to implement and manage projects in ways that align with their values and long-term vision for their whenua.

Looking to the future, stakeholders who were interviewed noted that **understanding and addressing the capability needs** within the environmental sector has proven to be a complex challenge. They stated that there is a lack of baseline data regarding the specific skills and workforce requirements. This gap in knowledge made it difficult for agencies to understand what capacity was required, and how to strategically plan for capacity building across the funding streams as well as contracted projects. It was suggested that agencies need a clear mechanism to articulate environmental and conservation capacity and capability requirements, and use this intelligence to develop a strategy to build capacity for the future. This involves not only recognising current gaps but also adopting a strategic view to ensure that capacity building efforts align with long-term environmental goals.

2.5 Project delivery

The effectiveness of project delivery has been assessed primarily based on data collected during the Year 1, Year 2 and te ao Māori evaluation reports. Key features of successful J4N project delivery are reported below.

2.5.1 Effectiveness of J4N project delivery

Networks and partnerships are enablers of successful project delivery

The evaluation found that establishing partnerships can support successful project delivery. Data collection with projects during year 1 and year 2 of the evaluation revealed that the most successful projects in terms of job creation and delivering expected environmental impacts were those that actively sought out partnerships. Building relationships with organisations and individuals who could provide expertise or support helped to enhance project delivery.

Examples included projects partnering with central and local government, iwi, Māori organisations, landowners, and farming communities. For example, in Northland, the Te Mana o te Wai Fund enabled collaboration between the regional council, iwi, and farmers to improve freshwater management. This project engaged marae in setting a 30-year vision for water, gathering information, and undertaking practical work to protect waterways. This collaborative approach ensured that local knowledge and cultural values were integrated into environmental management practices, setting the project up for success (Allen and Clarke, 2024a).

The evaluation also highlighted that partnerships with scientific organisations can enhance project outcomes. Several J4N projects established such partnerships to bolster their environmental initiatives. For instance, a project that focused on restoring the mauri of Lake Moawhitu, collaborated with researchers at the Cawthron Institute to combine Western scientific evidence with mātauranga Māori (Allen and Clarke, 2024b). Additionally, a J4N project run by an iwi forestry rental trust partnered with Scion to explore innovative approaches to land management, including honey production, planting natives, and restoring the ngahere (Allen and Clarke, 2024b). These partnerships enabled the projects to leverage scientific expertise and technology, enhancing their capacity to achieve long-term environmental goals.

The evidence also highlights the value of connecting with regional councils. These connections facilitated access to additional resources, expertise, and support. They also helped align project goals with regional environmental priorities, ensuring more comprehensive and sustainable outcomes (Allen and Clarke, 2023a; Ministry for the Environment, 2023a).

Partnership with iwi and Māori organisations

The evaluation found that projects including iwi, hapū, and Māori leadership or meaningful participation were more likely to achieve long-term impacts (Allen and Clarke, 2024b). Māori, iwi, and hapū have a unique and invaluable role in protecting the environment for future generations. Ensuring meaningful Māori participation and leadership in environmental projects honours Te Tiriti o Waitangi commitments and fosters long-term environmental resilience (Allen and Clarke, 2024b; Ministry for the Environment, 2022a).

The evaluation found that projects led by or partnered with iwi and Māori organisations tended to incorporate holistic environmental management principles. Iwi organisations approached J4N work from a comprehensive perspective, considering entire catchments and ecosystems. They often spoke in terms of 'maunga through to waterways' as integral to their Iwi identity. Many participants highlighted the deep connection they felt to their whenua and waterways, viewing J4N as part of a broader system of ecosystem kaitiakitanga. This holistic approach ensured that environmental stewardship was integrated with cultural values and long-term sustainability goals (Allen and Clarke 2024a; Allen and Clarke 2024b).

Clear objectives and goals provide a foundation for successful project implementation

The evaluation found that projects were more likely to succeed when there was strong alignment between J4N objectives and the goals of implementing organisations. The Year 1 and Year 2 evaluation data collection indicated that projects that had clear goals enabled them to maintain focus and adapt strategies as needed, meaning they were well placed for successful delivery (Allen and Clarke 2023, Allen and Clarke 2024a).

For example, in Auckland and Manawatū-Whanganui, iwi and hapū representatives highlighted how programme objectives supported their own aspirations for environmental restoration and cultural reconnection. Project personnel described how J4N helped to advance their goals around restoration of their whenua, including removing invasive species from culturally significant sites.

The alignment between programme objectives and iwi aspirations enabled meaningful collaboration, with one project representative noting that J4N goals finally enabled work they had wanted to undertake for decades. When project objectives resonated with stakeholder values and long-term visions, it created a strong foundation for sustained engagement and successful delivery.

Dedicated project management is important for project delivery success

The evaluation found that projects which achieved high full-time equivalent positions, built capacity, and delivered strong environmental outcomes tended to have robust management structures (Allen and Clarke, 2024a). These successful projects invested in dedicated project management roles from the outset, ensuring a focus on sustainability and efficiency throughout the project lifecycle. Effective project managers played a crucial role in planning, coordinating, and overseeing project activities, ensuring that goals were met on time and within budget.

Dedicated project management involved continuous monitoring and evaluation of project progress. Effective managers regularly assessed project performance against J4N contracted outputs, made necessary adjustments to keep the project on track, and communicated regularly with their agency contract manager regarding progress. This proactive approach allowed for the early identification and resolution of potential issues, minimizing disruptions, and ensuring steady progress towards project goals.

Conversely, projects that delayed appointing a project manager, or only appointed a part-time manager, or experienced frequent changes in project management faced significant implementation barriers. These challenges often led to delays in project activities, difficulties

in maintaining stakeholder engagement, and inefficiencies in resource allocation. For example, a J4N project that delayed appointing a project manager for 12 months struggled to engage key partners including tāngata whenua, which ultimately impacted the project's success. This delay had a significant impact as the waterway had high value to the hapū and it reportedly meant that mātauranga Māori was not adequately considered in the project from the outset (Allen and Clarke, 2024c).

DOC's 'delivery managers' model supported project success in some regions

While most evidence focused on project-level factors, there was little data available regarding factors that supported successful delivery from an agency perspective. Interviews with DOC personnel indicated that the implementation of its 'delivery managers' model supported project success. Under this approach, each project was assigned a dedicated delivery manager, often a DOC contract manager. This structure allowed the advisors to become highly familiar with each of their assigned projects, facilitating better coordination and problem-solving. It was reported that the delivery managers could provide targeted support to projects whenever issues arose, enhancing overall project performance and outcomes. However, it was noted that this level of capacity and support was not uniformly available across all regions of New Zealand, with some areas experiencing delivery managers being spread too thinly.

2.5.2 Critical success factors for project delivery

The evaluation found that **alignment of programme goals with the aspirations of implementing organisations** is important for project success. Projects were more likely to succeed when there was strong alignment between J4N goals and stakeholder values and long-term visions. This alignment enabled organisations to maintain focus, adapt strategies as needed, and sustain engagement throughout project delivery.

Establishing partnerships is a critical success factor for project delivery. Projects that actively sought out partnerships with organisations and individuals who could provide expertise or support were the most successful in creating jobs and delivering expected environmental impacts. Examples include collaborations with central and local government, iwi, Māori organisations, landowners, and farming communities, which enhanced project delivery and ensured the integration of local knowledge and cultural values. Partnerships with scientific organisations also bolstered project outcomes. Connections with regional councils facilitated access to additional resources, expertise, and support, aligning project goals with regional environmental priorities and ensuring more comprehensive and sustainable outcomes.

The appointment of a **dedicated project manager** from the outset is crucial for the successful delivery of projects. Having a project manager in place from the beginning ensures clear leadership, consistent oversight, and effective coordination of project activities. J4N projects with a dedicated project manager were able to navigate complexities more effectively, leading to timely and successful outcomes.

2.6 Data, reporting and accountability

2.6.1 Effectiveness of the J4N data, reporting and accountability approach

There were no consistent programme-wide metrics in the initial stages of J4N

The programme was established in a context in which there was a need to rapidly begin delivery, and programme objectives were developed without clear definitions of what success would 'look like'. Environmental and employment output targets were not determined at the outset; rather, they were developed based on potential outcomes indicated by the proposed projects, and later approved by Ministers (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2021). As such, in the early stages of the programme there were no consistent metrics that were used by all agencies (Ministry for the Environment, 2021a).

In the interim, the five agencies all had diverse data requirements, reporting, and information management systems. The agencies understandably focused on collecting what they needed, and what their Ministers and stakeholders wanted. However, this led to inconsistency, overlapping measures and unnecessary complexity. The lack of consistent measuring and reporting across initiatives meant there was limited ability to develop a comprehensive programme-wide view and restricted the data available to assess overall progress.

It was also reported that, in some cases, contracts required reporting on metrics that were not used or relevant. Interviewees stated that this was particularly the case with contracts issued in the early stages of the programme.

> *"Each agency ran with their own reporting model, it was a rush to get it out on the ground. There were some contracts that required reporting on things that don't get used or aren't helpful, and some metrics that are important didn't go into contract." (Stakeholder interview)*

An early challenge was the lack of a consistent way to measure employment. A definition of a 'job' was not adopted until December 2020, after the Employment, Education and Training (EET) Secretariat worked with the J4N Secretariat and other accountable agencies to develop and apply a broadly consistent set of quantitative measures (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2021; Ministry for the Environment, 2021a). It was reported that these standardised employment metrics have proven to be of significant benefit to cross-agency collaboration, enabling employment outputs to be compared with reporting for broader government initiatives (Ministry for the Environment, 2023a).

An additional challenge was that repeat maintenance activities, such as checking and rebaiting trapping lines, were not consistently captured in reporting systems, which only recorded the initial installation. This meant that the full scope of ongoing conservation work was not reflected in activity counts, resulting in an incomplete picture of the actual work effort delivered across some projects.

The approach to reporting was refined over time

Once metrics were agreed, agencies needed to retrofit the requirements into existing contracts and information management systems. It was reported that this involved a substantial administrative burden for the agencies, as well as the organisations contracted to deliver the projects.

> *"Reporting requirements were still being finalised when contracts were done, so then we had to go back and alter contracts. This was extra work that could have been avoided." (Stakeholder interview)*

Related to this was the frequency and level of detail of reporting over time. This reportedly changed several times before agencies settled on an acceptable compromise. Representatives from government agencies reflected that, while it was important to hold projects to account, the reporting requirements were initially confusing, too frequent, and generated data that was not always useful. This was reflected in the experience of many project personnel that participated in the Year 1 and Year 2 evaluations, who described inconsistent requirements between the five government agencies, and the burden and associated high compliance cost of reporting (Allen and Clarke, 2023a; Allen and Clarke, 2024).

> *"Most organisations wouldn't have the administrative capacity [to complete the reporting] and the ability to measure environmental outcomes. It took Jobs for Nature one-and-a-half years before they got the reporting right." (J4N Project Manager, quoted in Allen and Clarke, 2023a)*

These challenges were recognised by the Secretariat. In the second year of the programme, the frequency of time-based project reporting was reduced from monthly to quarterly, which was reported to help in reducing errors and improving data quality. Projects that participated in years 1 and 2 of the evaluation indicated that quarterly reporting was appreciated, and confirmed that reporting requirements simplified over time (Allen and Clarke, 2023a; Allen and Clarke, 2024b).

At the same time, the Secretariat refined reporting requirements to focus solely on achievements directly resulting from J4N funding, and excluding data attributed to co-funding or in-kind contributions. This shift aimed to provide a clearer understanding of the direct impacts of the funding. The Secretariat also improved the data validation process so that errors could be more easily identified and addressed (Ministry for the Environment, 2022a).

Some issues remained unresolved, including lack of demographic and employment status data on programme participants

While these amendments were reported to make the data more robust and consistent, several issues remained that were not resolved during the programme. The data validation process required manual checking due to difference in funding recipients' capability (Ministry for the Environment, 2023a). It was also reported that metrics capturing stakeholder engagement and relationship building were too limited. The programme had only two measures for capturing

engagement activities, both of which were added in 2023: the number of wānanga[11] and the number of catchment groups[12] created or supported. As at December 2024, 443 wānanga were reported as being delivered and 955 catchment groups created or supported. However, these measures did not adequately capture the full range of engagement work undertaken by projects, including stakeholder meetings, relationships established with community groups, and advisory groups formed. The J4N programme would have benefited from a wider set of measures to capture stakeholder engagements. There was also a metric for regulatory implementation, but no projects reported against it and it has since been removed (Allen and Clarke, 2024a). A key issue related to data and accountability was the absence of demographic data on programme participants. Government agency representatives stated that the agencies involved in the programme typically did not collect demographic information as part of their standard reporting requirements. There was reported reluctance from partner agencies to include this data collection, as contracted projects were already tasked with gathering extensive information. Furthermore, legal advice regarding privacy requirements indicated that collecting demographic data might not be feasible. This added another layer of complexity to the issue.

As a result, there is currently little information at the programme level on who worked in the projects. The absence of demographic data means there is no objective way to assess whether the programme is reaching the groups it was intended to support, despite positive feedback from projects on the ground (Jobs for Nature Advisory Group, n.d.). This hindered the ability to fully convey the impact of the programme beyond the immediate environmental and employment outputs, making it difficult to evaluate the broader social and economic benefits.

It would also have been beneficial to collect data on prior employment status, skills levels, and other factors that influence programme impact. A social return on investment portfolio analysis of four J4N projects found that employment outcomes deliver different social value depending on participants' prior circumstances, with higher social value generated for people who were previously unemployed compared to those who were previously in some form of employment (ImpactLab, 2024). Without systematic collection of employment history and participant characteristics, the programme cannot accurately assess whether it is effectively targeting those who would benefit most from intervention.

2.6.2 Critical success factors for programme data, reporting and accountability

One critical success factor is **agreeing on programme-level reporting requirements early in the process**. Establishing these requirements from the outset helps to avoid delays and inconsistencies that can arise when reporting standards are unclear or change mid-project. Early agreement ensures that all stakeholders have a shared understanding of what data needs to be collected and reported, which facilitates smoother implementation and more

[11] This measure was reported to MfE from Q1 2023/24
[12] This measure was reported to MfE from Q4 2022/23

accurate tracking of progress. This would allow for better planning and resource allocation, ultimately contributing to the overall success of the programme.

Another essential factor is the **establishment of standardised data collection methods and definitions**. Standardisation helps to avoid overlapping measures and unnecessary complexity, which can lead to confusion and inefficiencies. By using consistent data collection practices, projects can ensure that the information gathered is comparable and reliable across different initiatives. This uniformity is crucial for accurately assessing the programme's impact and making informed decisions based on the collected data. Clear definitions and methodologies also help to streamline the reporting process, making it easier for all parties involved to comply with the requirements.

Finally, it is important to **be aware of the reporting burden**, especially for smaller organisations with limited administrative support. Excessive or overly detailed reporting requirements can lead to missing, incomplete, or erroneous data, as smaller teams may struggle to keep up with the demands. To mitigate this, reporting processes should be designed to be as straightforward and efficient as possible, without compromising the quality of the data collected. Providing support and resources to smaller organisations can also help them meet reporting requirements more effectively. By balancing the need for comprehensive data with the capacity of the organisations involved, programmes can ensure more accurate and meaningful reporting outcomes.

2.7 Transition and sustainability

2.7.1 Effectiveness of the end-of-programme transition

Transition and sustainability were considered from the start

The review of documents and stakeholder interviews conducted as part of the evaluation confirmed that J4N was designed as a finite programme, with an understanding that projects needed to plan for their continuation without ongoing financial support from the programme.

The J4N Investment Framework included enduring outcomes as a consideration for initial funding decisions. As such, the procurement process for J4N funding required applicants to have considered sustainability beyond the life of the programme. Government agency representatives stated that sustainability was a key criterion for the success of applications. Projects that demonstrated a clear plan for sustainability and the ability to continue post-funding were given higher scores.

Stakeholders also reported that there was clear communication from the outset about the limited timeframe of the funding and the expectation that after the five-year programme, projects would need to conclude or become self-sustaining.

> *"We have been clear from the outset that J4N is meant to 'super charge' projects and provide funding to accelerate jobs and environmental gains, then organisations need to maintain themselves." (Stakeholder interview)*

It was reported that some projects built this into their project planning, with iwi, council, community or other groups committing to undertake maintenance work in future years, or have active plans in place to secure future funding (Ministry for the Environment, 2023c).

Some projects faced significant challenges in becoming self-sustaining

Despite efforts to encourage sustainability planning, it was reported that it became clear by the programme mid-point that many projects would struggle with the post-programme transition.

> *"There is always optimism at the start. Following through on the sustainability plans years later can be difficult, especially when organisations have got used to having the extra funding." (Stakeholder interview)*

While projects were initiated with the understanding that the funding was a finite intervention, the J4N Advisory Group considered that expecting the community organisations who had been successful in gaining funds to find replacement funding post the J4N programme was naïve (Jobs for Nature Advisory Group, n.d.). Community groups and smaller organisations frequently lacked the capacity and experience to secure alternative funding sources or generate sufficient revenue to maintain their activities. The complexity of ongoing maintenance requirements, such as pest control, further compounded these difficulties, as these tasks often required specialised skills and consistent funding.

Agencies had varying perspectives on whether projects should be supported to continue post-programme

Stakeholders also reported a perception that different agencies and individuals had varying perspectives on the extent to which projects should be supported to continue post-programme. Some agencies had used their funding streams primarily for short-term job creation, and focused on delivering infrastructure or interventions such as tree planting that require minimal ongoing maintenance.

> *"With our projects, once fencing was done, it was done – they knew there was an end point." (Stakeholder interview)*

This approach contrasted with other agencies who supported activities like pest control or habitat restoration that need sustained management to remain effective. These agencies recognised that without continued assistance, many projects risked reverting to their previous state, thereby undermining the initial investments. For these agencies, there was a focus on framing what the transition would look like for projects once the funding ended, considering ongoing maintenance requirements and ensuring that projects could continue at some level after the programme.

A strategy was developed to support transition and sustainability

In the second year of the programme, planning commenced on a transition strategy which aimed to ensure the long-term impact of the investment. Published in June 2023, the Programme Transition Strategy outlined a unified approach and objectives for transitioning across delivery agencies (Ministry for the Environment, 2023a). The strategy focused on

consolidating the environmental benefits achieved and enabling those who were employed and upskilled through the programme to continue utilising their skills (Ministry for the Environment, 2022a).

The Programme Transition Strategy (Ministry for the Environment, 2023d) comprised two main activities. The first activity focused on direct engagement between delivery agencies and project partners to discuss the long-term needs and aspirations of projects beyond their current work programmes. Agencies were also tasked with ensuring that projects could participate in the national digital platform (detailed below) and facilitating connections between projects and other regional entities, such as regional councils, training institutes, and MSD, to support worker transitions.

For example, it was reported that DOC brought together projects to strategize on securing additional funding, developed regional transition plans, and deployed staff to work directly with projects to share funding opportunities and act as brokers or connectors to funding entities and DOC partners. This approach reportedly ensured that most projects would continue beyond the funding period. For example, Save the Kiwi received $19.7 million J4N funding enabling it to extend the national footprint of kiwi-safe habitat. This extended network requires ongoing maintenance, and to ensure the work can continue an endowment fund has been established to attract philanthropic funding (Save the Kiwi, 2021).

The second activity focused on the development of a national digital network platform called Tūhono Taiao ('Nature Connections'). This platform aimed to enhance collaboration between projects and broader environmental stakeholders by sharing best practices, tools, data, knowledge, resources, expertise, and personnel (Ministry for the Environment, 2023a). It includes features such as an interactive map to find similar groups, request support, and showcase project achievement (Department of Conservation, 2024).

In addition to activities outlined in the strategy, it was reported that MfE-funded projects with a budget underspend were permitted to allocate up to $50,000 towards transition planning. This funding could be used for activities, such as hiring consultants to assist with business strategy and planning, or for training initiatives to help kaimahi enhance their CVs. However, uptake of this offer has reportedly been low, with most projects preferring to allocate any available funds to on-the-ground activities.

2.7.2 Sustainability of J4N outcomes

The programme has the potential to contribute to a sustainable environmental workforce

As discussed in section 2.2.1, the J4N programme was initially framed as an immediate job creation response to anticipated job losses due to COVID-19. The focus was on employment starts, and did not originally focus on longer term employment prospects or sustainable capacity development. Some of the agencies retained the focus on getting people into work, and as such did not consider long term employment sustainability to be a measure of success.

> *"It didn't feel like we needed to do much transition planning because this was already done as part of contracting. We had trained people in work skills, ready to go into another work programme." (Stakeholder interview)*

For other agencies, the strategic shift of emphasis from employment starts to longer term environmental benefits enhanced the sustainability of programme outcomes by enabling funding to be channelled into project roles with greater permanence and career development potential. The Secretariat's 2023 annual review identified this approach as improving the programme's potential to deliver ongoing workforce development and sustained employment benefits (Ministry for the Environment,2023a).

Discussions with J4N projects conducted as part of the Year 1 and Year 2 evaluation indicate that staff were highly sought after and had transitioned to permanent employment or secured contract work with entities, including the private sector, regional and local councils, and DOC. The training received through J4N, including education and training credits and diverse work experience, was reported to be instrumental in creating these pathways (Allen and Clarke, 2024).

However, the long-term impact of the programme on workforce sustainability cannot yet be fully determined. Further monitoring will be necessary to determine whether the skills and employment opportunities provided through the programme will result in enduring benefits and whether the workforce can maintain its growth and adaptability in the evolving environmental sector.

It is too early to assess the sustainability of environmental gains, but the activities funded are scientifically supported approaches with evidence of effectiveness

Assessing the likely sustainability of environmental impacts is challenging due to the inherent time lag between conservation activities and measurable environmental outcomes. Environmental benefits take time to accrue due to natural ecological timescales, such as the time required for seedlings to reach maturity, or pest control activities to result in biodiversity improvements. Programme data primarily reports on environmental outputs rather than longer term outcomes, reflecting these natural time delays rather than limitations of the programme itself.

Stakeholders also emphasised the challenges in considering sustainability of outcomes at the end of a five-year programme, noting the environmental outcomes require long term commitment. This was recognised by projects; for example, some benefits from J4N investments in Kaipara Moana are expected within 10 years (such as reduced sediment entering the harbour), the full restoration of the Kaipara Harbour and its ecological recovery is expected to take 50-100 years (Ministry for the Environment,2025b).

However, the activities funded through J4N are well-established, scientifically supported methods for improving environmental outcomes. While comprehensive outcome data may not yet be available, there is a strong body of scientific evidence demonstrating the environmental benefits of these intervention types. For example, native tree planting has been shown to deliver climate mitigation benefits (Buckley et al., 2023), while wetland restoration has been confirmed to improve ecosystem biodiversity and carbon sequestration (Tomscha et al., 2021).

It was reported that projects led by iwi often viewed their initiatives as long-term investments that they would continue to support after the J4N funding ended. This perspective is rooted in a deep commitment to environmental stewardship and the intergenerational responsibility to protect and restore natural resources. Iwi-led projects typically incorporated succession planning and sustainability strategies to ensure that the environmental benefits achieved would be maintained and built upon over time (Allen and Clarke, 2024b; Allen and Clarke 2024c). In contrast, some interviewees reported a perception that other organisations treated the funding more like a one-time grant, focusing on immediate outputs without the same level of foresight for legacy and continuity. These entities often did not engage in comprehensive succession planning or develop robust sustainability frameworks, which led to challenges in maintaining project momentum once the initial funding was exhausted. This highlights the importance of integrating long-term sustainability planning into environmental projects from the outset, ensuring that the positive impacts can endure and evolve beyond the initial funding period.

A mechanism for sustainability employed by some projects is the use of covenants facilitated by the Queen Elizabeth II National Trust (QEII Trust). The QEII Trust collaborates with private landowners to protect significant sites on their land through legally binding covenants. Some projects leveraged this mechanism to ensure the long-term preservation of environmental outcomes. By placing covenants on land titles, the QEII Trust ensures that even if the land is sold, future landowners are legally obligated to maintain the protected status of the area. This means that critical habitats, such as native bush, cannot be destroyed by new owners, as the covenant remains in effect. Stakeholders reported that this is an effective method to safeguard environmental assets, ensuring that conservation efforts are sustained regardless of changes in land ownership.

A further approach for ensuring sustainability is securing landowner agreements. As part of the J4N funding contracts for activities such as riparian planting, fencing, and sediment control on private land, it was crucial to ensure that landowners committed to sustaining these environmental protection activities after the funding ended. Because they were receiving public funds, landowners had obligations to continue the necessary control and maintenance to keep these initiatives alive. This commitment was essential to ensure that the environmental benefits achieved through the funding would be maintained over the long term. By securing these agreements, the programme aimed to foster a sense of responsibility and stewardship among landowners, ensuring that the investments made would result in lasting positive impacts on the environment.

2.7.3 Critical success factors for sustainability

Developing comprehensive transition strategies helps ensure programme legacy and continuity. The J4N experience demonstrated that dedicated transition planning, including direct engagement between agencies and contracted projects, facilitated smoother transition beyond programme conclusion. Successful strategies focused on consolidating environmental benefits, enabling continued skill utilisation, and connecting projects with regional entities and funding opportunities.

Projects that **integrate sustainability planning into their initial design** and are **actively supported to keep an ongoing focus on project sustainability** are more likely to succeed

in the long term. This approach ensures that sustainability is not an afterthought but a core component of the project from the outset. For instance, iwi-led projects often viewed J4N funding as 'seed funding' to advance their long-term environmental aspirations for their whenua. This perspective encouraged them to plan for the future, ensuring that the benefits of the funding would continue beyond the initial investment. It was also reported that some iwi projects were new to this type of work, and so received active and ongoing support from contract managers. In contrast, some stakeholders observed that trusts and NGOs were more likely to treat the funding as a one-time grant, focusing on immediate outputs without always planning for sustainability. This difference in approach highlights the importance of embedding sustainability into the project's DNA to ensure enduring positive impacts.

Agile project structures that can scale up or down are another critical success factor for sustainability. The evaluation found that organisations capable of expanding operations during periods of significant funding availability (such as J4N) and then scaling back when programmes conclude were better positioned for long-term transitioning and sustainability. This flexibility enables organisations to maximise impact during funded periods while maintaining essential functions and capacity when external funding ends. Organisations with adaptable structures could absorb temporary increases in staff and activities without compromising their underlying sustainability, ensuring continuity of their mission beyond programme completion.

Ongoing support for sustainability efforts is crucial for maintaining momentum and achieving long-term success. While there is often an expectation of a sustainability plan at the start of a project and a flurry of activity towards the end, there can be a vacuum in the middle where projects may struggle without continued guidance and resources. To address this, projects need consistent support throughout their lifecycle, including access to expertise, funding, and other resources. This ongoing support helps projects adapt as the programme transitions through its phases, ensuring that they can maintain their activities and outcomes. By providing continuous assistance, stakeholders can help projects overcome challenges and sustain their environmental benefits over the long term, creating a lasting positive impact on the environment and the communities involved.

2.8 Lessons learned

This section addresses Year 3 KEQ3: What can be learnt from the J4N programme that can be applied to future large scale, cross-agency, targeted funding programmes?

The findings from the Year 3 evaluation informed the development of the following overarching lessons for consideration in future large scale, cross-agency, targeted funding programmes.

Collaboration and coordination

Fostering a culture of collaboration among participating agencies is crucial for the success of large-scale funding programmes. Collaboration helps address complex, cross-cutting issues more effectively by leveraging the strengths and expertise of different agencies. Overall, the success of J4N demonstrates that with the right context and incentives, cross-agency collaboration can be highly effective. However, fostering this level of collaboration in a

business-as-usual context is a challenge that future programmes must address. The evaluation offers the following lessons.

- Implementing cross-agency programmes of scale and complexity, such as J4N, must be led from the top, with strong buy-in from Ministers, agency leadership, and personnel at all levels. Leadership commitment is essential to set the tone and priorities for the programme, ensuring that all agencies are aligned towards common goals. In the J4N programme, the establishment of the SLU Ministers' group was a key mechanism for aligning the programme across different sectors. At the agency level, the active involvement of Chief Executives and Deputy Chief Executives was crucial. Their authority and access to resources were vital in operationalising the joint approach and maintaining momentum.
- The evidence indicates that having a secretariat function is crucial for the success of large-scale funding programmes. The J4N programme benefited from the establishment of the J4N Secretariat. The Secretariat played a critical role in aligning the five agencies and multiple funding streams, minimising parallel efforts and duplication. This included setting up essential systems, such as the reporting framework, having a single line of communication to the SLU Ministers, and supporting agencies with specific tasks related to the programme, such as OIA requests. A similar coordination function is likely to be beneficial in future investment programmes involving multiple agencies.
- Retaining some degree of agency autonomy is important, to leverage specialised knowledge, expertise, and connections in their specific domains. However, the J4N programme experienced mixed buy in and engagement from the different agency partners. This indicates the need for collaborative compromise, where agencies prioritise collective objectives over individual priorities.

Aligned metrics and reporting

Developing a streamlined reporting system should be a priority at the outset of complex, large-scale initiatives. Ideally, this should be in place before procurement and contracting begins, and should reduce administrative burden while providing clear, consistent metrics for measuring progress. This includes setting realistic milestones that do not overburden contracted providers, and ensuring that data collection methods are standardised across agencies from the start.

In the J4N programme, the context of establishing the programme quickly meant consistent metrics were not initially implemented, making it difficult to develop a comprehensive programme-wide view of progress. It also created challenges with reporting requirements, including the resource-intensive nature of reporting and inconsistencies across different agencies.

In future programmes, an aligned set of metrics developed in the early stages of the programme would help ensure that progress is accurately tracked and reported. A key lesson is that when programmes have objectives related to delivering outcomes to people, such as employment, social or wellbeing benefits, it is vital to collect demographic data. Collecting demographic data allows agencies to understand who is benefiting from the programme and

to ensure that it is reaching its intended target groups. This data can reveal whether certain populations are underrepresented or underserved, enabling adjustments to be made to improve inclusivity and equity. Additionally, demographic data helps in evaluating the broader social and economic impacts of the programme, beyond just the immediate outputs. It provides insights into how different groups are affected, which is essential for tailoring initiatives to better meet the needs of diverse communities.

The development of a single reporting system across funds and agencies would further streamline processes, easing the reporting burden and reducing administrative overhead.

Agile and adaptive procurement approaches

Large scale programmes that aim to tackle complex issues present an opportunity to think differently about procurement. In the J4N programme, traditional procurement methods struggled to keep pace with the dynamic needs of the programme. Agencies had success in adopting more agile and flexible procurement strategies.

In contexts in which initiatives need to be delivered quickly, standard procurement models such as contestable funding rounds may not be viable. In these circumstances, accelerating or scaling up existing initiatives can leverage established data, models, and business cases to enable swift decision-making while ensuring confidence in the projected outcomes.

A social procurement approach can be useful in achieving a range of broader community benefits. This involves prioritising suppliers and contractors who deliver additional value to the community, such as using local suppliers, offering community support services, and fostering local businesses. For instance, selecting projects that include support for career development opportunities that can equip individuals with skills that benefit them beyond the programme's duration. Additionally, requiring contracted entities to support local businesses ensures that the procurement process contributes to local economic development.

Flexibility in procurement contracts is also crucial. Designing contracts that are flexible and can adapt to changing circumstances is essential for the success of large-scale programmes. Contracts should include clauses that allow for adjustments in response to changing circumstances or new information. This flexibility can help address unforeseen challenges and ensure that projects can adapt as needed to remain effective. For example, if the cost of materials increases unexpectedly, contracts should allow for price adjustments without penalising the providers.

Finally, it is important to ensure that innovative procurement approaches do not compromise accountability and transparency. Clear guidelines and criteria for procurement decisions should be established from the outset. This helps maintain trust between agencies, suppliers, and other stakeholders, ensuring that all parties understand the processes and conditions under which procurement decisions are made.

Capacity building to ensure long-term programme impact

Investing in capacity building for all involved agencies and stakeholders is essential for the effective management of large-scale programmes. This includes capacity building at all levels

of the system, to ensure complex programmes are managed effectively and achieve their intended outcomes. In the J4N programme, at the agency level participation in cross-agency processes provided capability building opportunities through meetings, workshops, and working groups. This helped ensure those managing the programme have the necessary skills and resources to manage their roles effectively to enhance the overall success of the programme.

Large scale initiatives offer the opportunity for strategic capacity building. In J4N this was a not an initial focus due to the need to provide rapid job creation. However, for long-term success and broader impacts, it is crucial to invest in longer-term skill development. This involves enhancing capacity to undertake specialist tasks that will be needed for future efforts. This capacity building should include strategic approaches to address national skill shortages. This can be achieved by redesigning investment criteria to focus on long-term capability building and give greater weight to projects that can demonstrate the ability to fill the identified capacity gaps.

Furthermore, investing in capacity building should focus on long-term sustainability. This means not only providing training and resources for the duration of the programme but also ensuring that the skills and knowledge gained are retained and can be applied to future initiatives.

Setting up systems for long-term sustainability

Planning for the long-term sustainability of future large scale, cross agency programmes is crucial to ensure that benefits are not short-lived but continue to positively impact the community for years to come. This involves a comprehensive approach that includes considering how programmes will be maintained and funded after the initial funding period ends.

As touched on above, one of the key aspects of this planning is building local capacity, which means empowering local communities and stakeholders with the skills, knowledge, and resources they need to take ownership of the projects. In the J4N programme, long-term capacity was a key consideration; the most successful projects were designed with a focus on building local capacity and securing additional funding to continue their work beyond the initial phase.

Ensuring that there are robust plans in place for the long-term maintenance of benefits is vital for achieving lasting impact. In the J4N programme a transition strategy was developed in the latter half of the programme. Its effectiveness could have been enhanced by providing ongoing guidance and resources to support projects throughout the entire programme duration to help projects establish systems that would sustain their environmental gains beyond the programme's conclusion.

Building strong networks and alliances throughout the programme is an enabler for sustainable impacts. The J4N programme developed valuable sustainability tools, including national community of practice and the Tūhono Taiao website. Although planning commenced in 2021, the substantial development work required meant these became fully operational in the programme's later stages. Earlier implementation of such platforms would have better

supported project sustainability by giving projects more time to share resources, access future funding streams, and collaborate on innovative approaches to ongoing project delivery. By taking a proactive and strategic approach to sustainability, programmes like J4N can create enduring positive impacts.

3 Conclusions and recommendations

This section sets out the conclusions of the Year 3 evaluation. It provides the key findings under each KEQ, drawing out aspects of the J4N programme that worked well and capturing key lessons.

KEQ1: How well was the J4N programme implemented? How effective were the following components of the programme model: cross-agency arrangements; procurement and contracting; regional arrangements; capacity building; project delivery; data, report and accountability; and sustainability.

The cross-agency approach was largely effective in achieving its intended outcomes, although challenges in engagement and institutional barriers remained.

The substantial investment in the J4N programme created a strong impetus for agencies to work together, aligning and leveraging investments beyond their specific mandates. The establishment of formal structures played a crucial role in facilitating cross-agency collaboration, driven by top-level leadership. The SLU Ministers' group, the Reference Group, and the Deputy Chief Executives Group were instrumental. These groups provided the oversight and strategic direction to the J4N programme.

Another important feature of the cross-agency approach was the Secretariat, which provided cross-agency coordination. It facilitated communication, prevented duplication of efforts, and supported the agencies with essential tasks. The interagency committees, such as the Interagency Risk Assessment Committee and the Benefits Forum, further strengthened the collaborative approach by promoting transparency, sharing knowledge, and fostering a more integrated programme implementation.

The retention of agency autonomy was important for leveraging specialised knowledge and expertise, enabling agencies to efficiently manage their resources and achieve their specific goals. However, this autonomy also contributed to the persistence of agency silos, with some institutional barriers and differing accountability measures hindering full collaboration. In addition, the engagement and buy-in from agencies varied, and the transition to business-as-usual operations saw a decline in collaborative efforts among some agencies.

The procurement and contracting approach adapted to the evolving needs of the J4N programme, leveraging existing relationships and integrating social value considerations.

The procurement and contracting approach was effective in several respects. The collaborative effort among the five government agencies demonstrated strengths in adapting procurement strategies to meet the evolving needs of the programme's different phases. The procurement strategy met the initial need to rapidly allocate funds and create jobs by accelerating or scaling up existing initiatives. Leveraging pre-existing models and business cases enabled fast job creation and provided a degree of confidence in the anticipated outcomes. In the later phases of the programme, the use of social procurement methods

enhanced the programme's impact by integrating social value considerations, such as supporting local suppliers and providing career development opportunities.

The contracting approach in the J4N programme, however, faced several challenges. Initially, agencies operated with misaligned contracting models, leading to cashflow issues, and high compliance costs for funded organisations with multiple J4N contracts. Efforts to streamline contracting requirements in the second year of the programme were met with some success, but legal and administrative barriers within agencies limited the extent of alignment that was possible. While some projects successfully renegotiated contracts to secure necessary adjustments due to rising inflation and supply chain disruptions, others faced difficulties in achieving contract variations that fully covered the increased costs of materials and equipment, or that allowed for realistic adjustments to employment targets.

Some projects were able to renegotiate their contract easily and secure necessary adjustments. However, other projects reported difficulties achieving adequate contract variations to cover increases in the cost of materials and equipment needed to carry out environmental restoration activities. Project personnel also reported challenges in adjusting contracted outputs related to job creation when it became clear that employment targets were too high (Allen and Clarke, 2023a).

Regional Partnership Groups leveraged local knowledge and existing structures to guide strategic J4N investments, although establishing groups in areas without pre-existing structures proved challenging.

The regional arrangements in the J4N programme were effective in several key areas. The groups aimed to create a unified vision at the regional level through collaborative efforts from various stakeholders. Ensuring the involvement of key regional entities, including regional councils and iwi, was critical to the success of these groups. The regional approach allowed for coherent investment across regions, enabling coordinated funding for restoration projects and reducing the risk of duplication by leveraging local knowledge and existing environmental management strategies.

However, the process of establishing new regional groups in areas without existing structures required significant time and effort to build trust and effective collaboration. This was particularly evident in regions where there were multiple iwi and hapū, making it difficult to assemble a representative group. Additionally, the urgency of the pandemic context did not always allow sufficient time for relationship building, which is crucial for effective collaboration. Despite these challenges, the relationships formed through the regional groups have built a strong foundation for sustained collaboration, although the majority of these groups are no longer meeting after the programme's conclusion.

Capacity building in the J4N programme effectively developed a skilled workforce and enhanced workforce capacity for long-term environmental stewardship.

The capacity building processes in the J4N programme were effective, contributing to the programme's success. Initially, the focus was on rapid job creation to provide immediate employment opportunities and leverage existing skills within the workforce. As the programme progressed, there was a strategic shift towards longer-term skill development to ensure a

sustainable and skilled workforce for future environmental restoration efforts. Additionally, capacity building efforts focused on enhancing the skills of iwi and hapū, supporting them to continue living and working on their whenua and exercise autonomy in environmental management.

The training provided through J4N projects created ongoing employment opportunities and supported long-term environmental stewardship. Overall, the capacity building processes facilitated the development of a skilled workforce, meaning the programme is likely to contribute to future environmental restoration efforts.

Project delivery is enhanced by fostering strong partnerships, leveraging economies of scale, and investing in dedicated project management

The success of J4N projects was enhanced by establishing strong networks and partnerships. Projects that actively sought out collaborations with central and local government, iwi, Māori organisations, landowners, and scientific institutions were more effective in job creation and delivering environmental impacts. In addition, projects that leveraged economies of scale were able to reduce costs and maximise their impact. Larger projects benefited from shared infrastructure and lower per-person costs, allowing them to reinvest savings into additional activities.

Effective project management was crucial for the success of J4N projects. Projects with dedicated project managers from the outset were better able to plan, coordinate, and oversee activities, ensuring goals were met on time and within budget. Conversely, projects that delayed appointing a project manager faced significant implementation barriers.

At the regional level, DOC's 'delivery managers' model supported project success by providing targeted support and facilitating better coordination. However, the availability of this support was not uniform across all regions.

The J4N programme's transition and sustainability approach was considered in the early phases of the programme, there is a need for ongoing support and long-term planning as projects are delivered

The J4N programme's transition and sustainability approach was designed with an understanding that projects needed to plan for their continuation without ongoing financial support. From the outset, the J4N Investment Framework emphasised enduring outcomes, requiring applicants to demonstrate sustainability plans as a key criterion for funding success. While the initial programme focus was on funding allocations and project establishment, sustainability considerations were revisited following the Year 1 Annual Review, which recommended developing a transition strategy. This led to the development of the Programme Transition Strategy in the programme's second year, aiming to ensure the long-term impact of the investment. This strategy focused on consolidating environmental benefits and enabling those employed and upskilled through the programme to continue utilising their skills. Key activities included direct engagement between delivery agencies and project partners to discuss long-term needs, facilitating connections with regional entities, and developing a national digital network platform, Tūhono Taiao, to enhance collaboration and resource

sharing. Additionally, projects with budget underspends were permitted to allocate funds towards transition planning, although uptake was reportedly low.

The J4N programme has the potential to contribute to a sustainable environmental workforce. Previous evaluations indicated that many staff transitioned to permanent employment or secured contract work, thanks to the training and experience gained through J4N. However, it is too early to fully assess the long-term impact on workforce sustainability, necessitating further monitoring. Similarly, assessing the sustainability of environmental gains is challenging. Mechanisms like covenants facilitated by the QEII Trust and landowner agreements were employed to ensure long-term preservation of environmental outcomes. Despite these efforts, understanding the sustainability of the environmental impacts will require long-term commitment and further evaluation.

KEQ2: What are the critical success factors for effective large-scale, cross-agency, targeted funding programmes?

KEQ3: What can be learnt from the J4N programme that can be applied to future large scale, cross-agency, targeted funding programmes?

The evaluation of the J4N programme provides several insights that can inform the development and implementation of future large-scale, cross-agency, targeted funding initiatives. This includes the identification of critical success factors that agencies need to consider when implementing initiatives that are similar in size and design to J4N. These are discussed in relation to each of the key components of the model, accompanied by key recommendations.

Ensuring an effective cross-agency approach

The evaluation found that implementing the Jobs for Nature cross-agency programme was largely successful. Critical success factors for replicating this approach include:

- Strong commitment from Ministers, agency leadership, and personnel at all levels to set the tone and priorities for effective cross-agency collaboration, maintaining engagement as programmes transition from the launch phases into business-as-usual operations.
- Establishing access to independent advice through a Reference Group that can provide strategic advice, investment assurance, and accountability by asking challenging questions that keep agencies aligned with programme objectives.
- Ensuring that incentive settings are conducive to collaboration by balancing incentives (such as substantial funding) with directives (such as Ministerial mandates for cooperation) to motivate agencies to work together towards common goals.
- The establishment of a secretariat function is crucial for aligning multiple agencies and funding streams, minimising duplication, ensuring cohesive communication and support, and providing a single line of communication to Ministers.
- Recognising individual agency priorities while leveraging agency expertise by allowing agencies to retain autonomy over their investments so they can contribute to shared

goals without compromising their core missions, fostering genuine collaboration that utilises each agency's specialised knowledge and connections.

Recommendations

In line with these critical success factors, to set future cross-agency programmes up for success, Ministers and agency leadership should:

- Ensure strong buy-in and leadership commitment from top-level officials, including Ministers and Chief Executives, with clear mandates for cross-agency collaboration that can be sustained throughout the programme lifecycle.
- Create formal independent advisory bodies with diverse expertise, clear roles and responsibilities, and the authority to provide strategic oversight and challenge agencies on programme objectives.
- Design appropriate incentive settings that balance funding incentives with accountability measures to motivate genuine collaboration while respecting individual agency mandates and expertise.

Once established, the secretariat or other coordination function should:

- Set up processes for joint interagency activity, including interagency committees focused on specific programme aspects such as risk management, benefits realisation, and programme transition to promote transparency, knowledge sharing, and integrated implementation.
- Balance collaborative objectives with agency autonomy by allowing agencies to retain decision-making authority within their areas of expertise while contributing to shared programme goals.

Procurement and contracting in complex and changing circumstances

Traditional procurement methods often struggle to keep pace with the dynamic needs of large-scale programmes. The J4N programme demonstrated the success of adopting more agile and adaptive procurement strategies, with several critical success factors emerging:

- Social procurement and contracting approaches, which prioritise suppliers delivering additional community value, can achieve broader benefits beyond the direct mandate of the programme. In particular, social procurement can contribute to building capacity and capability, particularly for iwi and smaller businesses and organisations. This approach often requires the provision of additional support and active contract management to ensure successful outcomes.
- Regardless of delivery pressures, it is important that projects include business cases or modelling of expected benefits, costs, and risks, ensuring shared understanding among stakeholders. This should be proportionate to project scale, with agencies providing support to smaller organisations that may lack the capability or capacity to develop comprehensive business cases.

- Alignment of contracting approaches across agencies is vital for cross-agency initiatives to avoid confusion, compliance burdens, and inefficiencies for organisations holding multiple contracts with different agencies. This includes standardising contract terms, payment models, performance metrics, and reporting requirements.
- Flexibility in procurement contracts is crucial in large-scale complex programmes, allowing for adjustments in response to changing circumstances such as inflation, supply chain disruptions, shifting programme priorities, and evolving market conditions.

Recommendations

Building on these critical success factors, agencies implementing future large-scale, cross-agency programmes should:

- Use adaptive procurement and contracting approaches by developing flexible procurement strategies that can adapt to evolving programme needs, including the ability to adjust contracts in response to changing circumstances or shifting programme priorities.
- Align contracting approaches across agencies by standardising contract terms, payment models, performance metrics, and reporting requirements to reduce confusion, compliance burdens, and administrative costs for organisations holding multiple contracts.
- Implement proportionate business case requirements that are scaled to project size and organisational capacity, with agencies providing support to smaller organisations that may lack the capability to develop comprehensive business cases.

Establishing effective regional coordination and governance

Implementing effective regional governance and coordination presents challenges for large-scale programmes. The J4N programme's Regional Partnership Groups provided insights into successful regional collaboration models, with critical factors for success including:

- Building on existing collaborative structures or supporting their organic development, rather than creating entirely new government-led entities. Pre-existing groups demonstrated greater sustainability and coherence in their approach to regional coordination.
- Establishing clear and compelling incentive structures is essential for meaningful stakeholder engagement and sustained participation.
- Having the right mix of stakeholders is crucial for the legitimacy and effectiveness of regional groups. Building trust with diverse stakeholders requires adequate time and dedicated effort.
- Investing sufficient resources into operational support is fundamental to group functionality. This includes funding for coordination activities and administrative support to ensure groups can focus on their strategic objectives.

Recommendations

Building on these critical success factors, agencies implementing future large-scale, cross-agency programmes with regional components should:

- Leverage existing networks by identifying and assessing pre-existing collaborative structures before establishing new regional entities
- Create strong incentives for sustained engagement that provide clear value propositions for regional group participants, including meaningful input into programme direction
- Allocate dedicated operational funding for coordination activities, including meeting facilitation, communication systems, and administrative functions.

Embedding capacity building as a core aspect of complex programmes

Building workforce capacity is essential for the long-term success and sustainability of large-scale programmes. The J4N programme's experience with capacity development demonstrated the importance of strategic workforce planning, with several key factors for effective implementation:

- Strategic capacity building should focus on long-term skill development to address national skill shortages and ensure sustainability. This involves designing investment criteria to prioritise projects that demonstrate the ability to fill capacity gaps.
- Embed formal training and qualifications into project delivery requirements to ensure individuals have the necessary knowledge and skills to achieve sustainable careers beyond programme completion.
- Establish strong partnerships with iwi, hapū, and Māori to support long-term capacity building, respecting their autonomy and leveraging their expertise for sustainable project outcomes.
- Develop a clear mechanism to articulate capacity needs, using this intelligence to strategically plan and address current gaps and future requirements.

Recommendations

In line with these critical success factors, future cross-agency programmes should:

- Conduct comprehensive workforce planning by investing in sector-wide skills assessments and establishing systems to identify current and future capacity needs.
- Develop a capacity building strategy guiding the allocation of programme resources to address priority skill shortages and regional requirements.

Ensuring effective project delivery

The J4N programme's experience with project delivery demonstrated the importance of strategic alignment and partnership, with several key factors for effective implementation:

- Aligning programme goals with implementing organisations' values and long-term visions is important.
- Strategic partnerships enhance project delivery through collaboration with organisations and individuals who can provide essential expertise and support. In particular, ensure meaningful participation and leadership from iwi, hapū, and Māori to achieve long-term impacts.
- Ensure projects appoint a dedicated project manager from the outset to provide clear leadership, consistent oversight, and effective coordination of project activities.

Recommendations

Building on these critical success factors, agencies implementing future large-scale, cross-agency programmes should:

- Create mechanisms to connect projects with relevant networks to leverage additional resources and expertise.
- Require the appointment of dedicated project managers from programme inception with clear accountability for coordination and delivery outcomes.

Implementing robust data, reporting and accountability systems

Effective data management and reporting frameworks are essential for tracking progress and demonstrating impact in large-scale programmes. The J4N programme's experience with data collection and reporting highlighted several key factors for successful implementation:

- Establish programme-level reporting requirements and standardised metrics from the outset to ensure consistency across agencies and enable accurate cross-programme and impact assessment.
- Design reporting processes that balance comprehensive data collection with organisational capacity, particularly for smaller organisations with limited administrative resources.
- Implement robust data validation processes and regular refinement of reporting requirements based on programme experience to improve data quality and reduce compliance burden.
- Collect demographic and participant background data to enable comprehensive assessment of programme reach and social impact beyond immediate outputs.

Recommendations

Drawing from these critical success factors, agencies designing future large-scale, cross-agency programmes should:

- Establish data frameworks and standardised metrics before programme launch to ensure consistency across agencies and enable accurate progress tracking and impact assessment.
- Design reporting systems that balance data collection needs with organisational capacity, including streamlined processes for smaller organisations and appropriate reporting frequencies.
- Build in regular review and refinement processes for reporting requirements based on programme experience to continuously improve data quality and reduce compliance burden.

Planning for transition and sustainability

Effective transition and sustainability strategies are fundamental to ensuring lasting programme impact and continuity beyond funding periods. Critical success factors include:

- Integrate sustainability planning into project design from inception and provide ongoing support throughout the project lifecycle, recognising that organisations approach sustainability differently based on their perspectives and experience.
- Develop comprehensive transition strategies that focus on consolidating benefits, enabling continued skill utilisation, and connecting projects further funding opportunities.
- Support agile organisational structures that can scale operations up during funded periods and down when programmes conclude, enabling organisations to maximise impact while maintaining core functions and long-term viability.
- Provide consistent support throughout the project lifecycle rather than only at initiation and completion, addressing the critical middle phase where projects may struggle without continued guidance and resources.

Recommendations

In line with these critical success factors, agencies designing future large-scale, cross-agency programmes should:

- Develop a comprehensive transition strategy early in the programme to ensure long-term impact. This should include a focus on ongoing support to plan for sustainable impact during delivery.
- Engage delivery agencies and project partners in discussions about long-term needs and facilitate collaboration and resource sharing to support sustainability.

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Appendix B: Year 3 evaluation interview guide

Introduction

- Welcome participant to the interview
- Karakia timatanga
- Whanaungatanga: name/pepeha, who we work for and our position/role in the project, details of professional background as appropriate. Try to make a personal connection with the participant. Acknowledgement of contribution and thanks for their time.
- Brief overview of evaluation and interview
- Complete informed consent process, allowing time for questions
- Check audio recording consented

Background

1. Could you please tell me about your role and how you have been involved with the J4N programme?

[Check time period involved in the programme, how long involved, and in what role/s]

Programme design and set-up

I'm interested in hearing about the set-up of the J4N programme.

2. Can you describe the key considerations and priorities that guided the programme's design? How did these change over time?

3. How did the programme design and set-up interact with the shifting contexts at the time? [Prompts: COVID-19 lockdowns, economic forecasts]

4. Which stakeholders were involved in the design process, and how were they involved?

5. Can you tell me about any challenges or obstacles you faced during the J4N design phase? How were these addressed?

6. Overall, what worked well with the J4N design process? What didn't work well?

7. What key lessons regarding the design of the programme would you take forward, that might be relevant to future large-scale, cross-agency initiatives?

Reference and Advisory Groups

Can you tell me about J4N programme Reference Group and/or Advisory Group.

Note: Tailor questions depending on which group(s) the participant was involved in.

8. I'm interested in the membership of the Reference/Advisory Group. How was membership of the Group decided? Was the group comprised of relevant representatives? Were any voices or perspectives missing?

9. Can you describe how the Reference Group interacted with and advised those designing J4N? How effective was this process?

10. Can you describe how the Advisory Group provided ongoing advice to the J4N programme as was delivered?

11. What do you think were the most significant achievements of the Reference/Advisory Group?

12. Overall, what worked well with the J4N Reference/Advisory Group? What didn't work well?

13. What key lessons regarding the Reference/Advisory Group would you take forward, that might be relevant to future large-scale, cross-agency initiatives?

Cross-agency model

We have some questions to get your views about collaboration between the agencies involved in J4N.

14. Can you tell me about the cross-agency processes or structures that were set up to deliver the J4N programme?

15. In your experience, how effectively did the five government agencies work together to deliver the programme? What worked well and what did not?

16. To what extent did the objectives of agencies involved in the J4N programme? How did the agencies navigate any differences?

17. What strategies were used to ensure effective coordination between agencies? *[Prompt: effectiveness of Secretariat function]*

18. What were some of the main challenges faced during the cross-agency collaboration? How were these challenges addressed and resolved?

19. Can you provide any examples of successful outcomes for the programme, that resulted from the collaboration?

20. Overall, what worked well with the J4N cross-agency collaboration? What didn't work well?

21. What key lessons regarding cross-agency collaboration would you take forward, that might be relevant to future large-scale, cross-agency initiatives?

J4N funding, procurement and contracting

We are keen to hear about the process of funding and contracting J4N projects.

22. How were decisions made regarding which J4N projects would be funded? Looking back, how effective was this in selecting projects that met the programme's objectives?

23. Can you tell me about the contracting model for J4N projects. How well did this work? *[Prompt: consistency/difference in contracting model with agencies, and between agencies, flexibility of contracts]*

24. Was J4N funding, procurement and contract model adapted or different from traditional models? In what ways?

25. Was the procurement model and/or contracts adjusted as the programme progressed? In what ways? How did your agency become aware that the model was not working, and what changes were required?

26. Overall, what worked well with the J4N funding, procurement and contracting process? What didn't work well?

27. What key lessons regarding funding, procurement and contracting would you take forward, that might be relevant to future large-scale, cross-agency initiatives?

Programme data

Can you tell me about how your agency used data on the J4N programme.

28. How useful was the data that was gathered during the J4N programme? How did your agency use the data? To what extent did the data gathered align with your agency's objectives for the J4N programme?

29. Was there any gaps in the data that your agency collected? Anything that was collected but was extraneous or not useful?

30. Overall, what worked well with J4N programme data? What didn't work well?

31. What key lessons regarding programme data utility would you take forward, that might be relevant to future large-scale, cross-agency initiatives?

Capacity building

32. In what ways was capacity building part of the J4N programme? [Prompt: at the government, regional, and project levels]

33. How were the capacity building activities planned and designed?

34. How effective do you J4N capacity building activities were in achieving their objectives?

35. What has changed regarding nature-based capacity in NZ, that the J4N programme has contributed to? Can you provide any specific examples?

36. Overall, what worked well with J4N capacity building? What didn't work well?

37. What key lessons regarding capacity building would you take forward, that might be relevant to future large-scale, cross-agency initiatives?

Regional arrangements

38. Can you describe the role of regional bodies in the J4N programme. What were the functions of these regional bodies in J4N? What role/s did they have in decision making?

39. What organisations or individuals were involved in the regional bodies? Were the right representatives included?

40. How did the regional bodies interact with the agency national office? How effective was the relationship? *[Prompts: communications, roles and responsibilities, authority and delegations]*

41. To what extent do you think the regional decision making bodies could be applied to other government programmes? What are the necessary conditions for these to work well?

42. Overall, what worked well with J4N regional arrangements? What didn't work well?

43. What key lessons regarding regional bodies would you take forward, that might be relevant to future large-scale, cross-agency initiatives?

Project delivery

Thinking now about the delivery of J4N projects…

44. How effective were J4N delivery processes at the central, regional and local levels? What worked well and what didn't?

45. How were organisations that received J4N funding supported to deliver their projects?

46. How well did J4N programme delivery meet its objectives and goals?

47. Thinking about J4N projects that were most successful – what was it about these projects that made them work?

48. Now thinking about J4N projects that did not work so well – what were the main barriers to success? What could have been done differently?

49. Overall, what worked well with J4N project delivery? What didn't work well?

50. What key lessons regarding project delivery would you take forward, that might be relevant to future large-scale, cross-agency initiatives?

Sustainability

51. What evidence is there that the programme's outcomes will be sustained over the longer term?

52. How was sustainability considered during the planning and delivery of the J4N programme?

53. What activities has the programme undertaken to support the sustainability of its outcomes? How effective do you think these have been?

54. What are the main challenges faced at the central, regional and local levels in terms of sustainability?

55. Overall, what worked well in terms of J4N sustainability? What didn't work well?

56. What key lessons regarding sustainability would you take forward, that might be relevant to future large-scale, cross-agency initiatives?

Overall lessons

57. Thinking about everything we have discussed today, what are the critical success factors for large-scale, cross-agency initiatives?

58. What lessons do you think it is vital for this evaluation to capture, to inform future initiatives?

59. Is there anything else you would like to tell us today?

Closing

- Thank participant for the interview
- Provide overview of next steps
- Karakia whakamutunga

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