



# A review of the Darwin Plus Fellowships scheme

## **Biodiversity Challenge Funds: Building and Applying Evidence**

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)

Date: 17 May 2023

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## Authorship and acknowledgements

This report was authored by Danielle Freed. Inputs to the planning and execution of the study, and comments on drafts of the report were provided by Victoria Pinion.

## Disclaimer

NIRAS is the fund administrator for the [Biodiversity Challenge Funds](#) and commissioned this work on behalf of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) under Workstream 5 of the Biodiversity Challenge Funds.

NIRAS works with a range of specialists and consultants to carry out studies and reviews on the Biodiversity Challenge Funds. The views expressed in the report are entirely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views or policies of Defra, NIRAS or the Biodiversity Challenge Funds. Defra and NIRAS, in consultation with wider stakeholders as relevant, are considering all findings and recommendations emerging from this study in how they manage the Biodiversity Challenge Funds.

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Cover photograph: Dr. Austin and field team, Caribbean | Credit - Federico de Pascalis

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Darwin Plus is one of the UK Government Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' (Defra) Biodiversity Challenge Funds. It is aimed at delivering long-term strategic outcomes for the natural environment in the UK Overseas Territories (OTs)<sup>1</sup>. Biodiversity in the OTs is globally significant, with the OTs hosting some of the world's most delicate and complex ecosystems, and habitats home to many endemic species. It is estimated that the OTs contain approximately 94% of the biodiversity found within the UK and territories combined.

There are four schemes under Darwin Plus: Main Projects, Fellowships, Darwin Plus Local and Darwin Plus Strategic. Darwin Plus Fellowship funding is aimed at building capacity through training and education opportunities for UKOT nationals. The Fellowship funding scheme is intended to draw on wider technical and scientific expertise in the fields of biodiversity and the environment as a means to broaden knowledge and experience. Fellowships aim to support beneficiaries in both increasing their knowledge and to deliver long-term strategic outcomes for the natural environment of the OTs. Support to Fellows can include:

- Undertaking formal qualifications, where these are linked to the broad objectives of the Darwin Plus Scheme;<sup>2</sup>
- Broadening their own experience of working in any of the four broad themes through appropriate related work experience, such as, but not limited to, internships with relevant organisations or training for skills required in relevant sectors;
- Developing policy skills that could include attendance at relevant national or international workshops or meetings.

## 1.2 Objectives

The focus of this study is to gain an understanding of how the Darwin Plus Fellowship scheme is being used, what has been achieved and provide evidence-based recommendations that can be used to improve processes, strengthen projects and ultimately maximise the impact funds are able to generate. Specifically, this review aims to capture:

- The composition of funded Fellowships to date in terms of geography, topic, and diversity of applicants
- The composition of unsuccessful applications for Fellowships, alongside an understanding of why they were not funded
- How successful Fellowships are across disciplines, geographies and contexts
- Longer term impact and outcomes of funded Fellowships alongside recommendation to increase impact

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<sup>1</sup> The 14 UKOTs are: Anguilla, Bermuda, British Antarctic Territory, British Indian Ocean Territory, The British Virgin Islands, The Cayman Islands, The Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Montserrat, The Pitcairn, Henderson, Ducie & Oeno Islands, Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, Sovereign Base Areas (SBA), Akrotiri and Dhekelia (on Cyprus), The Turks & Caicos Islands

<sup>2</sup> The broad themes of Darwin Plus Main are:

- Biodiversity: improving and conserving biodiversity, and slowing or reversing biodiversity loss and degradation;
- Climate change: responding to, mitigating and adapting to climate change and its effects on the natural environment and local communities;
- Environmental quality: improving the condition and protection of the natural environment;
- Capability and capacity building: enhancing the capacity within OTs to support the environment in the short- and long-term.

## 1.3 Methodology

### 1.3.1 Data Sources

This study utilised a combination of Darwin Plus Fellowship portfolio desk review and key informant interviews as follows:

- **Portfolio review:** Analysis was conducted of the full sample of 20 Darwin Plus Fellowship projects from initiation in 2012 to the most recent funding round conducted in 2023. While this timespan comprises eleven rounds of funding, Darwin Plus Fellowship applications were received in only nine of these rounds and grants awarded in only seven out of the eleven rounds of funding. A total of eighteen successfully funded Darwin Plus Fellowships were analysed alongside two unsuccessful applications. Additionally, one contextually related Darwin Plus Main project application was also reviewed. Project documentation consisted of grant applications, budget outlines, letters of support and reviewer comments. Project reporting was also reviewed, though given the small number of completed projects, availability of this form of evidence was limited.
- **Key informant interviews:** Interviews were conducted with a range of both past and present key stakeholders associated with the Darwin Plus Fellowship funding scheme. Stakeholder targeting rationale was based on achieving a wide range of perspectives from varied stakeholders across the fund, with considerations taken as to level of involvement and availability. Stakeholders included representation from the NIRAS fund management team and the Darwin Plus Advisory Group alongside past and present Darwin Plus Fellowship beneficiaries. A total of 10 key informant interviews were conducted.

#### Box 1: Key Inquiry Questions

1. What about the current scheme is working well and where is there room for improvement?
2. Are there any barriers to utilisation of the scheme? Are there any clear impediments to people applying or being successful at being awarded funding?
3. Why is it that the Darwin Plus Fellowship scheme receives more applications in certain UKOTs, and what lessons can we learn from this?
4. Could the scheme be usefully expanded to fund broader opportunities such as undergraduate programmes, internships and training?
5. Is the funding stream distinct enough when compared to Darwin Plus Main scheme and/or the recently launched Darwin Plus Local scheme?

### 1.3.2 Data Analysis and Synthesis

An evaluation matrix (Table 1) was designed to capture and organise data collected via portfolio review and key informant interviews. This matrix was informed by original Terms of Reference questions (Box 1) alongside an assessment of available evidence. Analysis and synthesis had three components; i) data collected through portfolio review was coded and analysed across a framework designed to capture and organise evidence across key lines of both quantitative and qualitative inquiry; ii) interview data was coded against the evaluation matrix; iii) synthesis of higher level findings and conclusions.

Table 1: Darwin Plus Fellowships Deep Dive Evaluation Matrix

Topic of Inquiry	Key Considerations
<b>Significance and Uniqueness</b> of Darwin Plus Fellowship Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why are applicants applying to this scheme?</li> <li>• Is there something distinct that makes this funding appealing to particular disciplines or geographic locations?</li> <li>• How do stakeholders perceive this funding in relation to other Darwin Plus funding schemes?</li> </ul>
<b>Fairness for Applicants:</b> accessibility, format, support and selection processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what degree to stakeholders find the application process to be fair and equitable? Are there any clear barriers or enablers to participation?</li> <li>• What did applicant support and feedback processes look like?</li> <li>• What did the selection process look like?</li> </ul>
<b>Design and Implementation:</b> available guidance, ongoing support, efficiency and proportionality of processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kind of support was available to successful applicants?</li> <li>• To what degree were reporting or administrative requirements considered fair and proportional?</li> <li>• What degree of flexibility was afforded to Fellows within the course of project implementation?</li> </ul>
<b>Legacy:</b> key achievements and outcomes, evidence of wider impact, emergent lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kind of processes have supported the capture and sharing of learning across stakeholders?</li> <li>• To what degree have Fellowships lead to improved capacity?</li> <li>• Is there evidence of wider impact? How has this been assessed?</li> <li>• What are some of the key lessons that have emerged?</li> </ul>

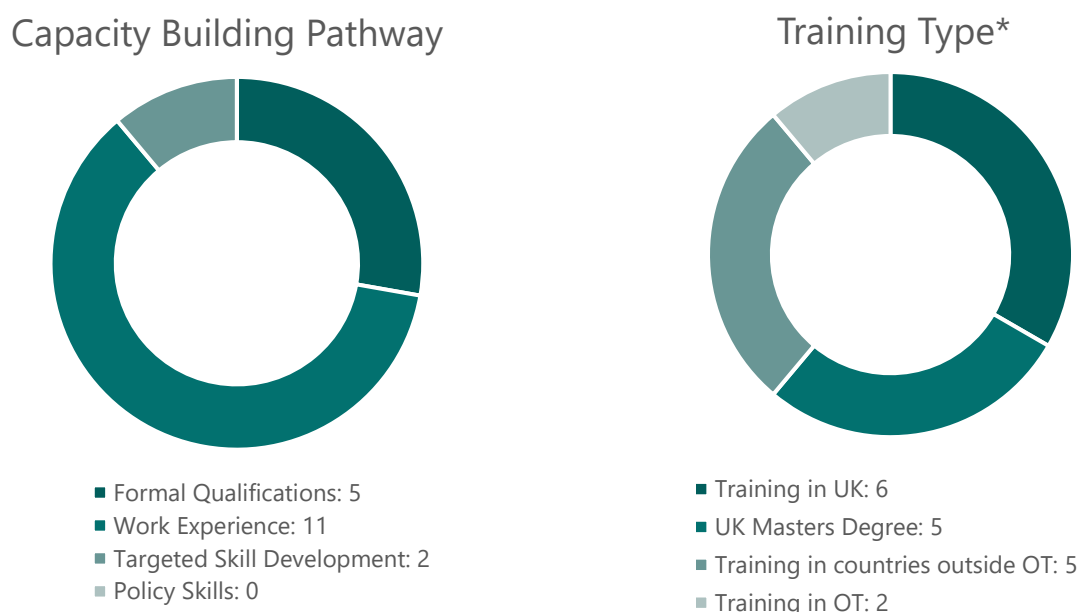
## 2. Description of Findings

An analysis of high level findings that have been synthesised across both Portfolio Review and key informant interview data are presented here. Following the analytical approach utilised to draw out these conclusions, findings are presented in alignment to each of the four evaluation matrix Topics of Inquiry

### 2.1 Significance and Uniqueness of Darwin Plus Fellowship Funding

**Darwin Plus Fellowship funding is highly-valued for its flexible nature, something seen as particularly useful given the dynamic OT context.** Similar to the varied terrain found across the Overseas Territories - OT environmental demands, capacity needs and educational opportunities vary greatly across territories (Figure 1 outlines the capacity building pathways and training types of approved fellowships). Key informants across stakeholder groups identified the fellowship fund as an important source of funding for the development of demand-led projects within a context where similar funding opportunities are limited. The broad scope of grant eligibility was widely recognised by stakeholders as a key benefit, as the absence of a minimum degree requirement means individuals from varied educational backgrounds have been able to benefit from grant making. Most notably, respondents expressed an appreciation for the ability to exercise agency in identifying their own capacity needs and carve out the path most suitable to their individual circumstances. Numerous

stakeholders identified this as a unique opportunity within a funding landscape often seen to dictate need and administer prescribed methods.

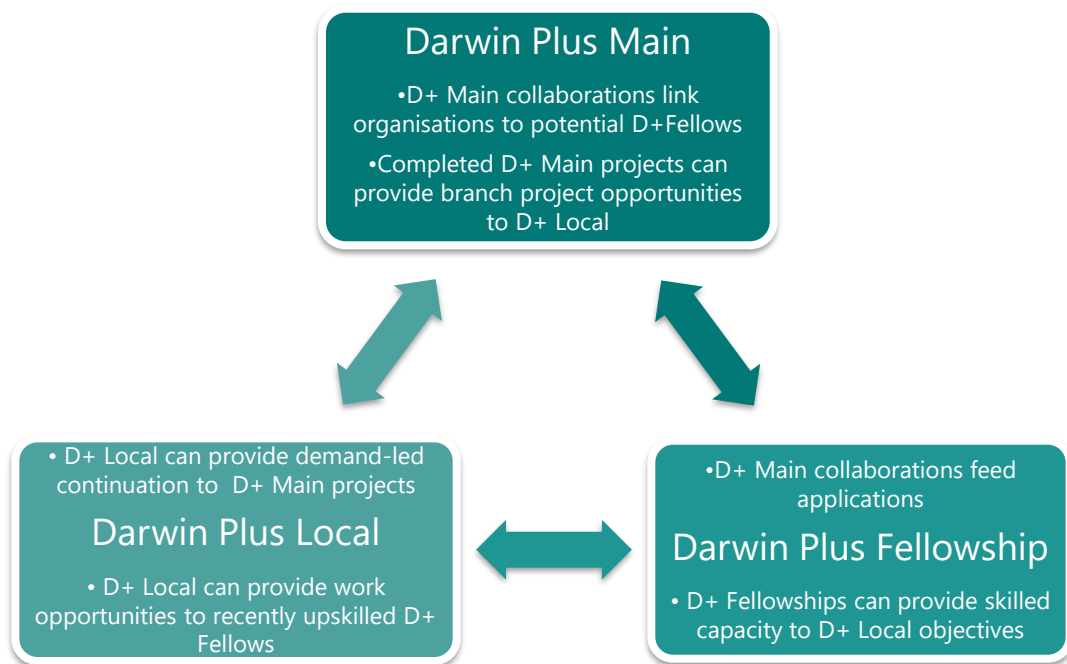


\*Inclusive of training opportunities pursued across all fellowships

Figure 1. Capacity building pathways and training types of approved fellowships

**There is strong evidence to indicate that fellows have been able to capitalise on the opportunity to design demand-led projects, resulting in a Darwin Plus Fellowship portfolio that is collaborative and highly tailored to both individual capacity and broader OT needs.** Portfolio review findings indicate that all successful Darwin Plus Fellowship applications were able to demonstrate both a strong link to OT strategic priorities and demonstrate strong potential transfer of knowledge. As highlighted within DPAG reviewer commentary, applications often displayed strong collaborative elements in the development of project objectives with both local and international partners recognised for their expertise. Project Leaders and Fellows noted this process as a particular asset to their work which supported them in ensuring project goals were of benefit to the Fellow, contextually relevant, feasible and demonstrated good value for money. In the case of SBA Cyprus, beneficiaries outlined the particular appeal this funding held for Early Career Researchers as an opportunity to increase their professional capacity while participating in a project of personal significance tied directly to local need. Conversely, evidence gathered from both UK and OT research organisations indicates collaboration in Darwin Plus Fellowship funding has been beneficial in providing them with opportunities to expand their institutional networks, open up collaboration opportunities for future funding bids and advance high priority research objectives.

**Stakeholders identify clear distinctions across the activities, goals and future potential for each of the Darwin Plus funding schemes.** Respondents across stakeholder groups voiced a distinct recognition for the individual value each of the Darwin Plus funding schemes provide. A common theme across respondents was an appreciation for a system of mutual reinforcement emerging across the Darwin Plus Funding context. For example, multiple Fellows expressed excitement for future engagement in Darwin Plus Local, identifying it as an ideal opportunity to utilise newly acquired Fellowship skills aligned to locally driven projects. Darwin Plus Local was also recognised for the potential it held to support locally driven efforts that could continue aspects of completed Darwin Main projects. Notably, there are very strong links between collaborations forged within Darwin Plus Main projects and Darwin Plus Fellowships. 18 out of 18 successful Darwin Plus Fellows noted previous Darwin Plus Main engagement either through direct collaboration on project work or through professional affiliation with Darwin Plus Main grantees.



*Figure 2. Darwin Plus Funding Mutual Reinforcement Potential*

**Respondent feedback on the prospect of merging Darwin Plus Fellowship and Darwin Plus Local schemes lean largely toward keeping the two schemes separate.** While the administrative benefits of one cohesive scheme were noted, these were counterbalanced by feasibility challenges of juggling fiscal and academic time lines within one funding scheme. Additionally, while similarities in funding objectives exist between Darwin Plus Fellowship and Darwin Plus Local, stakeholders largely characterised these funds as complementary and distinct in their potential to meet divergent sets of beneficiary needs.

**While stakeholders recognise and appreciate current Darwin Plus Fellowship funding opportunities, spaces to increase scope and resultant impact were identified.** As outlined above, respondents across all stakeholder groups were united in their view of Darwin Plus Fellowship Funding as a valuable means to support demand-led capacity building endeavours. Within key informant interviews several key avenues that would increase both scope and impact were identified. Specifically, multiple respondents noted that there existed an appetite for funding that would support capacity building efforts outside the current 24-month funding time frame limit. Extended time frames could expand the scope of beneficiaries to provide support to those individuals pursuing PhD goals as well as those interested in apprenticeship engagement along a longer time horizon. In



practical terms, longer funding periods were cited as an opportunity to accommodate wider time spans often necessary within ecological research.

## 2.2 Fairness for Applicants

**There is strong evidence indicating fair and transparent application approval processes have been put into place and are being actively employed.** Each application is assessed by the Darwin Plus Advisory Group (DPAG) against clearly outlined criteria to generate an applicant score. Assessment occurs across three DPAG members, each specifically chosen with consideration made to expertise, geography and technical strength. Evidence from both portfolio review and key informant interviews confirm that application processes include the generation of thorough feedback from the selection panel team. Successful applicants are provided with suggestions on how applications could be made stronger alongside any requirements that need to be met prior to the issuing of funding. One respondent noted a strong degree of appreciation for feedback that not only highlighted areas of technical improvement, but also requested assurances related to fellow welfare. Importantly, providing an important means to increase future successful applications, unsuccessful applicants receive a detailed outline of areas where improvement needs to be directed.

**Pro-active processes are in place to ensure the DPAG occupies a position to oversee an equitable application review process.** Respondents characterise the DPAG itself as a diverse composition of individuals in terms of academic discipline and geographical background, though some space has been cited to exist for the group to be more gender balanced. As a means to ensure all applications receive a non-biased review, members routinely recuse themselves from decision making where there might be an underlying conflict of interest. Indicating an appetite for inclusive ways of working, one respondent close to DPAG noted that the group had been recently able to capitalise on the shifts to online working brought about by Covid-19 to increase participation from membership across the OTs.

**While there is strong evidence indicating fair application approval processes, there is mixed evidence as to whether the Darwin Plus Fellowship applicant format is fully accessible.** Applications are submitted through Flexi-Grant, an open access portal with support provided in the form of online application guidance and pre-approved document templates. Respondents who were successfully awarded Darwin Plus Fellowships report the application process to be fair and straightforward. It is important to note here that data collection processes did not allow for the inclusion of perceptions from unsuccessful grant applicants. Likewise, it was not possible to gain an understanding of why interested individuals did not apply. There was agreement across stakeholders that there is varied capacity across OTs related to navigating grant application processes with some speculation expressed as to whether a lack of grant writing capacity served as a disincentive to participate. While the NIRAS administration team is fully available to answer queries related to clarification of requirements, low levels of initial interest meant resources were channelled elsewhere and Darwin Plus Fellowship application workshops were not delivered. Looking forward, these findings suggest space to explore avenues that could provide support to the application process as a means to minimise prior capacity as a barrier to access.

**Stakeholders suggest a lack of established relationships with lead organisations could be a key barrier for potential Darwin Plus Fellowship applicants.** There are clear benefits to utilising lead organisations as a channel to deliver access to funding. Identified as a key enabler, fellows note they were often able to lean on support provided by lead applicant organisations to navigate application requirements and there is a clear fiduciary need to utilise established organisations as a means to channel funds to fellowship beneficiaries. However, numerous respondents speculated as to whether prohibiting fellows from applying directly to funding could serve as a barrier to access for those individuals without prior links to suitable lead organisations. Notable here, 18 out of

18 Darwin Plus Fellows hold previous ties to the Darwin Plus Main funding scheme. Some respondents also warned of a risk in propagating North/South power imbalances by urging applicants to partner with UK based organisations. Interestingly, the portfolio review indicates that just 28% (n:5) Fellows partnered with UK based research organisations. 50% (n:9) of Fellows utilised an OT research organisation, while 22% (n:4) of Fellows partnered with OT government organisations. While this sample size is too small to make broad generalisations on the use of partner organisations, stakeholder perceptions on the topic indicate space to explore the origin of these relationships alongside opportunities to pro-actively facilitate and nurture these ties as a means to increase funding access.

**Evidence indicates that a full range of channels to engage potential applicants has not been employed, representing a key barrier to fair and fully accessible funding.** Stakeholders across fellowship funding expressed a common perception that, historically, Darwin Plus Fellowship Funding has not been afforded the same attention on the part of Defra as other Darwin Plus Funding schemes. Respondents cite a lack of communication and engagement with OTs on the subject of Darwin Plus Fellowship opportunities for a general lack of funding awareness and resultant low participation rates. Across 11 rounds of funding there have been only 18 successful applicants, with only 5 of the 14 OTs represented. As noted, 100% of successful Darwin Plus Fellows possess prior links to Darwin Plus Main funding, with fellows widely confirming their only knowledge of the funding scheme came from these ties. Utilisation of such a limited pool of applicants not only suggests a lack of full and fair engagement processes but also risks limiting Fellowship access to only a very narrow sector of individuals. Stakeholders voice an appreciation for a recent shift on the part of Defra to increase communication activities and engage OTs on the part of Fellowship Funding and cite space for this to be strengthened further

## 2.3 Design and Implementation

**Beneficiaries widely perceive reporting and administrative requirements to be fair and proportional, citing high levels of satisfaction with accompanying fund support.** Darwin Plus Fellowship Fund beneficiaries are required to provide Interim reports in addition to a Final Report submitted at the end of the award period. Respondents expressed a

shared understanding of the need for robust monitoring of public funds and generally perceived reporting requirements to be fair and proportional. Similarly, respondents characterised MEL processes as clear and

### The Case of SBA Cyprus

SBA Cyprus is the most represented OT across the Darwin Plus Fellowship Fund with 11 out of 18 Fellows coming from this OT. Key findings related to why funding has been successful here are outlined below:

#### Significance and Uniqueness of Funding

- Projects are largely centred on conservation objectives, often those related to understanding the impact of invasive species. Stakeholders note limited conservation funding opportunities for SBA Cyprus outside of Darwin Plus Funding
- Funding is highly valued because it permits fellows to both develop capacity and pursue distinctly demand-led research objectives
- Capacity objectives are distinct from other OTs where funding is often used for formal qualifications, funding here is seen as a valuable means to support on the job capacity development of Early Career Researchers
- Stakeholders note a preference to obtaining formal qualifications in Greece/Cyprus/SBA. Reasons include access to low/no cost high quality university options, access to specialty trained tutors and a preference to pursue degree qualifications in their native Greek language.

#### Fairness for Applicants

- Respondents note pre-existing capacity to navigate application processes as a key enabler
- UK and OT research organisations are used as lead applicants due to bureaucratic hurdles in using Government organisations to channel funds

straightforward. One key enabler commonly cited across stakeholders was support offered on the part of NIRAS fund management. All stakeholders noted satisfaction with the support and guidance provided by NIRAS, with respondents voicing a high level of appreciation for support that included clear communication, quick response rates and a positive attitude toward support provision.

**Views on the flexibility of funding are mixed. While stakeholders are pleased with fund management support across budgetary lines, inflexibility on the part of Defra to increase overall funding was cited as a challenge.** Current funding rules allow for resources to be shifted across years and budgetary lines. Budgetary increases after awards are made are not granted. The portfolio review indicates the most common form of requested project adaptation falls within the scope of shifting resources. Respondents were unanimous in their appreciation for flexibility and support offered by NIRAS in addressing these issues. Appreciation was also noted for the high degree of flexibility deployed to meet evolving accommodations necessary throughout the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, several respondents identify the inflexibility on the part of Defra to revisit the total amount awarded to be a key barrier to successful grant implementation. Specifically, stakeholders expressed a concern that, given the current cost of living crisis, absolute inflexibility on this issue held the potential to lead to welfare issues. Stakeholders cited the existence of at least one Fellow that was navigating hardship issues at the time of this review.

**While beneficiaries were largely pleased with funding support, spaces to refine and develop additional guidance were identified.** As outlined above, respondents were largely satisfied with funding support. However, opportunities to provide stronger guidance were identified. For example, some respondents noted a degree of uncertainty related to expectations related to budgetary reporting, suggesting space to clarify this guidance. The portfolio review found requests to clarify budgetary expenditures the most common critique across applications, suggesting a need to re-visit how budgetary guidance is delivered within applicant guidance. Specifically, numerous stakeholders cited space to provide stronger budget forecasting guidance related to cost of living details noting that many applicants are fully unaware of what average living costs look like in the UK. Other respondents identified a challenge in wanting to present a competitive application demonstrating sound value for money that would still meet cost of living needs. Noting that there is no upper budget limit to Darwin Plus Fellowship funding, this suggests space to provide clearer information on where budgetary expectations lie across the project typology.

## 2.4 Legacy

**Though these have yet to be fully explored, stakeholders express a clear appetite to develop processes that could capture, share and capitalise on learning.** Low participation numbers have limited the exploration of processes that could provide meaningful opportunities for fellows and related stakeholders to share learning. Learning exchange has been limited to informal links initiated by fellows working within the same context. Both fellows and representatives from fund management recognise the need for learning exchange opportunities and the benefits these processes could provide. Given the current increase in pace of participation, it will be important to explore avenues to share learning so that these lessons can be adequately captured, shared and capitalised upon.

**Given the small number of completed projects, data providing evidence of increased capacity is limited. However, anecdotal evidence on the topic is overwhelmingly positive.** At the time of this review, the Darwin Plus Fellowship funding has produced four completed projects. Reporting gathered in portfolio review indicates that three out of four of these were successful in achieving capacity building objectives and provided clear value for money. Testimony gathered from available fellows confirms this finding, with those contacted indicating

fellowship opportunities have directly led to increased capacity and a transfer of knowledge across their respective contexts. While the remaining project fell short of meeting objectives due to the fellow leaving their post, there is little evidence elsewhere in the review to suggest this is a significant threat to realising objectives across the fund. Conversely, stakeholders currently engaged in funding activities provided distinctly positive feedback and high levels of confidence that projects will be able to meet outlined objectives.

**There are positive indications of potential future impact. However, concrete MEL processes to measure impact and legacy have yet to be firmly established.** As noted, there are relatively few completed projects from which to gain an understanding of the impact funding has been able to achieve thus far. Findings indicate all current projects are on track to achieve objectives, suggesting high potential for resultant impact and legacy to occur. While MEL processes set to capture immediate outputs and outcomes have been put into place and are being actively deployed, there are currently no established channels that could capture impact occurring across a longer time horizon. Looking ahead as funding gains momentum, it will be important to explore and put into place feasible options for impact assessment.

**Looking ahead, stakeholders expressed enthusiasm toward an expansion of Darwin Plus Fellowship funding that could take on different shapes and meet diverse needs.** While stakeholders cite funding flexibility as one of the Darwin Plus Fellowship funding's strongest attributes, they also identified value in broader funding options that could take on a more tailored approach. Given the diverse set of contexts and capacity needs across OTs, stakeholders encouraged an exploration of multiple different approaches to funding that could meet varied sets of beneficiary needs. For example, channelling funding through a university based cohort means key processes such as recruitment, grant application, and administration would be supported by a university infrastructure. Fellows could also benefit from access to university research networks and the peer support working within a cohort brings. Key challenges to emerge associated with this approach include budget development for a programme set across a multitude of variables alongside questions as to whether one institution would be able to meet the diverse needs of OT fellows.

### 3. Recommendations

Recommendation 1 – **Actively explore opportunities to increase awareness and understanding of Darwin Plus Fellowship funding.** There is a disconnect between evidence pointing to a clear appetite for capacity building across OTs and a relatively low participation rate across the Darwin Plus Fellowship funding. Findings point to a widespread lack of awareness of Fellowship funding potential across the territories. While stakeholders voice an appreciation for the recent shift in Defra's approach to increase engagement on the topic with OTs, there is a uniform call for this to go further. Potential engagement avenues for Defra to pursue include implementation of a targeted outreach campaign to previously unreached OTs, fostering links with local and international NGOs and supporting OT governments to actively promote Fellowship Funding at events such as career fairs or business expositions. There is also space for fund management to take a more active role in communication processes. A dedicated communications work stream targeting potential applicants, project leaders, UK and OT government alongside the wider public could raise the profile of Darwin Plus Fellowship and increase understanding on funding opportunities. Key outputs to consider include social media content, e-newsletters, blogs, as well as a collaborative website where fellows can curate content showcasing stories of success.

Recommendation 2 – **Facilitate opportunities to better understand and mitigate barriers to access and participation.** Evidence suggests that both low levels of capacity to navigate application processes alongside a lack of connections to suitable lead organisations could both be serving as a barrier to access in fund participation. While it was outside the scope of this review to expose in full these barriers, it is worth further exploring the

degree to which these barriers serve to limit access. Channels to engage stakeholders here should be explored and used to inform a needs-based approach to mitigation. In addressing capacity to engage, one measure could include the delivery of targeted capacity building webinars to support application processes. Key actions to support collaboration could include facilitating opportunities to bring researchers, partners and broader stakeholder groups together. Potential partners need opportunities to build trust and understand one another's priorities. Explore cultivating spaces to exchange and learn both in person and through access to online collaboration spaces.

**Recommendation 3 – Support fund-wide capacity building and peer to peer learning opportunities.** While the primary Darwin Plus Fellowship objective is capacity building, this learning has been siloed within individual research projects. This represents a missed opportunity for lessons and best practice generated across the work of the fund to be captured and utilised by participants. Given the recent rise in funding momentum, providing opportunities to capture, share and capitalise from learning will become increasingly important. Defra and/or Fund managers should explore organising targeted Learning Activities to share emerging evidence and lessons in best practice across participants and relevant identified stakeholders. Some potential mediums could include webinars, targeted capacity building workshops, learning journeys, virtual visits as well as peer learning sessions.

**Recommendation 4 – Work toward raising the profile of the Darwin Plus Fellow - Nurture Fellowship and support Fellows in becoming Darwin Plus Ambassadors.** There is strong evidence indicating an appetite for increased engagement across both disciplines and geographic contexts, with Fellows expressing enthusiasm for the creation of formally established channels in which to share their experiences and foster new peer relationships. Importantly, nurturing the creation of a pro-active network of Fellows also provides an opportunity to raise the profile of the Darwin Plus Fellowship scheme. Findings indicate a strong enthusiasm across Fellows to share and publicise their Fellowship achievements. This appetite should be capitalised upon as a means to more widely expose funding opportunities. While current applications require an outline of how learning will be disseminated, this could go further by requiring the inclusion of budget lines targeted at outreach and engagement to support participation at conferences, workshops and webinars. Recognising that engaging in these fora present distinct challenges, it will be important to also facilitate targeted capacity building activities to support learning here. The delivery of Communication Toolkits could support Fellows in areas such as storytelling, photography and establishing an online presence.

**Recommendation 5 – As funding gains momentum, promote the utilisation of beneficiary feedback channels and explore support and guidance opportunities that could strengthen funding performance.** A key enabler identified across stakeholders was the timely support and guidance supplied by fund management. As a means of continuing this valued support and ensuring it is agile, adaptive and responsive it will be important to nurture and promote the use of beneficiary feedback channels. While fellows already have access to support offered through the Darwin Plus helpdesk in which to share their feedback, it could be useful to explore more pro-active approaches to gaining beneficiary perspectives. One potential avenue could be circulation of periodic online surveys or those circulated at key project milestones. Findings from this review indicate immediate opportunities to strengthen support exist in strengthening budget guidance. Specifically, evidence suggests a need for stronger guidance on budget forecasting related to cost of living as well as clearer information on where budgetary expectations lie across the project typology.

**Recommendation 6 – Revisit safeguarding protocol.** A large proportion of Darwin Plus Fellows travel far from their homes to study and train, representing a significant risk potential. Evidence from this review indicates that at least one fellow at the time of writing was experiencing serious hardship challenges. This suggests space to revisit current safeguarding processes to ensure these are fit for purpose. One identified challenge impacting welfare for fellows is the ongoing cost of living crisis. Immediate mitigation approaches here could be

strengthened budgetary support coupled with intensified scrutiny of budget lines at application review. While rules exist prohibiting an increase to award amount, Fellows could also benefit from guidance on where alternative hardship funding might be sourced.

**A7 – Develop a tailored MEL framework that can capture outcomes and impact.** As funding both gains momentum and ongoing projects mature it will be important to have in place processes that can capture indications of impact and legacy. Rigorous monitoring and reporting should be continued as this will support the creation of robust sets of data necessary to ensure results can be aggregated across projects for larger programme level assessment. The feasibility of a system of standardised KPIs or use of a results framework should be explored. There is also space to better capture engagement from an equity perspective, this could be improved upon by incorporating processes that clearly capture concrete demographic metrics. A strengthened focus on comprehensive pathways to impact and associated MEL processes at design stage will support embedding an impact focus from project onset. Recognising that impact often occurs across extended time horizons, explore utilisation of early indicators of success centred on core impact areas relative to each project. In addition to standardised metrics, it could be useful to also explore more qualitative approaches such as online surveys, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, periodic legacy evaluations or the creation of impact stories.

**Recommendation 8 – Recognising the dynamic context of OTs, pilot different Fellowship Funding programmes.** Evidence indicates stakeholders see a benefit to the utilisation of varied fellowship funding modalities that could be tailored to meet distinct beneficiary needs. Recognising that needs vary across OT contexts, an exploratory needs assessment could be a useful tool in gaining a better understanding of exactly how, where and in what form stakeholders across OTs see Darwin Plus Fellowship funding taking shape to best serve beneficiaries. Building on stakeholder perspectives, and grounded in solid MEL processes, design and pilot a variety of funding programmes across the OTs. Recognising that flexibility is widely identified as one of Darwin Plus Fellowship funding's strongest attributes, with evidence pointing to its use in delivering distinctly demand-led projects, it will be important to safeguard this feature as additional avenues are explored.

## Annex 1: Key Informants Interviewed

The following key informants were interviewed as part of the present study:

Name	Role
Eilidh Young	NIRAS, lead Darwin Plus administrator
Brendan Godley	Darwin Plus Advisory Group, former member
Nicola Weber	University of Exeter, D+ Main applicant
Peter Richardson	Marine Conservation Society, D+ Fellowship project lead
David Roy	UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, D+ Fellowship project leader
Angeliki Martinou	Enalia Physis Env. Research Centre, D+ Fellowship project leader
Luc Clerveaux	Darwin Plus Fellow, Round 3
Ioanna Angelidou	Darwin Plus Fellow, Round 8 and 10
Jason Daniels	Darwin Plus Fellow, Round 11
Selene Gough	Darwin Plus Fellow, Round 11

## Annex 2: Projects Reviewed

The following projects were reviewed as part of the portfolio analysis:

Project code	Project name
<b>Darwin Plus Fellowships</b>	
Round 2	
DPLUS024	Shayla Ellick - Carbon Sequestration in Community Forests, St Helena
Round 3	
3017 DPLUS032	Luc Clerveaux - MSc in Coastal and Marine Resource Management
Round 4	
3533	Jacqui Christian – Marine Planning for Pitcairn Islands
Round 5	
4009 DPLUS058	Natasha Stevens - Improving the biosecurity capacity in St Helena
Round 8	
DPR8F\1009 DPLUS101	Ioanna Angelidou - Invasive Non-Native Species are leading to biodiversity loss across the Sovereign Base Areas, Cyprus
Round 9	
DPR9F\1019 DPLUS 123	Elli Tzirkalli - Population study on pollinators such as moths and butterflies
DPR9F/1014 DPLUS124	Jakovos Demetriou – Increasing Awareness of the threat of Invasive Non-native Species
Round 10	
DPR1F\1042 DPLUS170	Maria Christou - Mapping Ecosystem Services and Disservices provided by insects within bird biodiversity hotspots
DPR1F\1043 DPLUS171	Nicole Mavrovounioti - Mapping the rare plants of Akrotiti and recording their interactions with pollinators
DPR1F\1044 DPLUS 172	Ionna Angelidou - Looking at the insect prey diet of the Eleonora's Falcon
DPR1F\1045 DPLUS173	Veta Wade – Darwin Plus Fellowship, Montserrat
Round 11	
DPR11F\1018 DPLUS193	Sovanye White - MSc in Biodiversity and Conservation
DPR11F\1017 DPLUS194	Selene Gough - Growing St Helena capability: biological data management, analysis and interpretation
DPR11F \1006 DPLUS197	Andreas Josephides - Developing an Interactive Educational Game for teaching about pollinators, invasive species and mosquitoes.
DPR11F\1009 DPLUS198	Katerina Athanasiou - Capacity development for the surveillance of established/invasive ticks and tick-borne diseases at the SBAs
DPR11F\1010 DPLUS199	Jason Daniel - MSc Island Biodiversity and Conservation
DPR11F\1013 DPLUS200	Jakovos Demetriou - Biodiversity and Spatio-Temporal Patterns of Ants in the Akrotiri Peninsula



DPR11F\1012 DPLUS201	Andri Varnava - Study on the wild bees of the Eastern Sovereign Base areas in Cyprus, Cyprus (Dhekelia, Ayios Nikolaos & Cape Pyla)
DPR11F\1014 DPLUS202	Evangelos Koutsoukos - Species richness and biological invasions of Chalcid wasps in Akrotiri Peninsul
DPR11F\1016	St. Luke LeBlanc - FdSc in Forestry
Darwin Plus Main	
Round 11	
DPR11S1\1028	Darwin Scholars: Building lasting capacity for conservation in the UKOTs

### Annex 3: Project Summary Information



Figure 3. Breakdown of OTs, lead applicant organisations and scientific disciplines

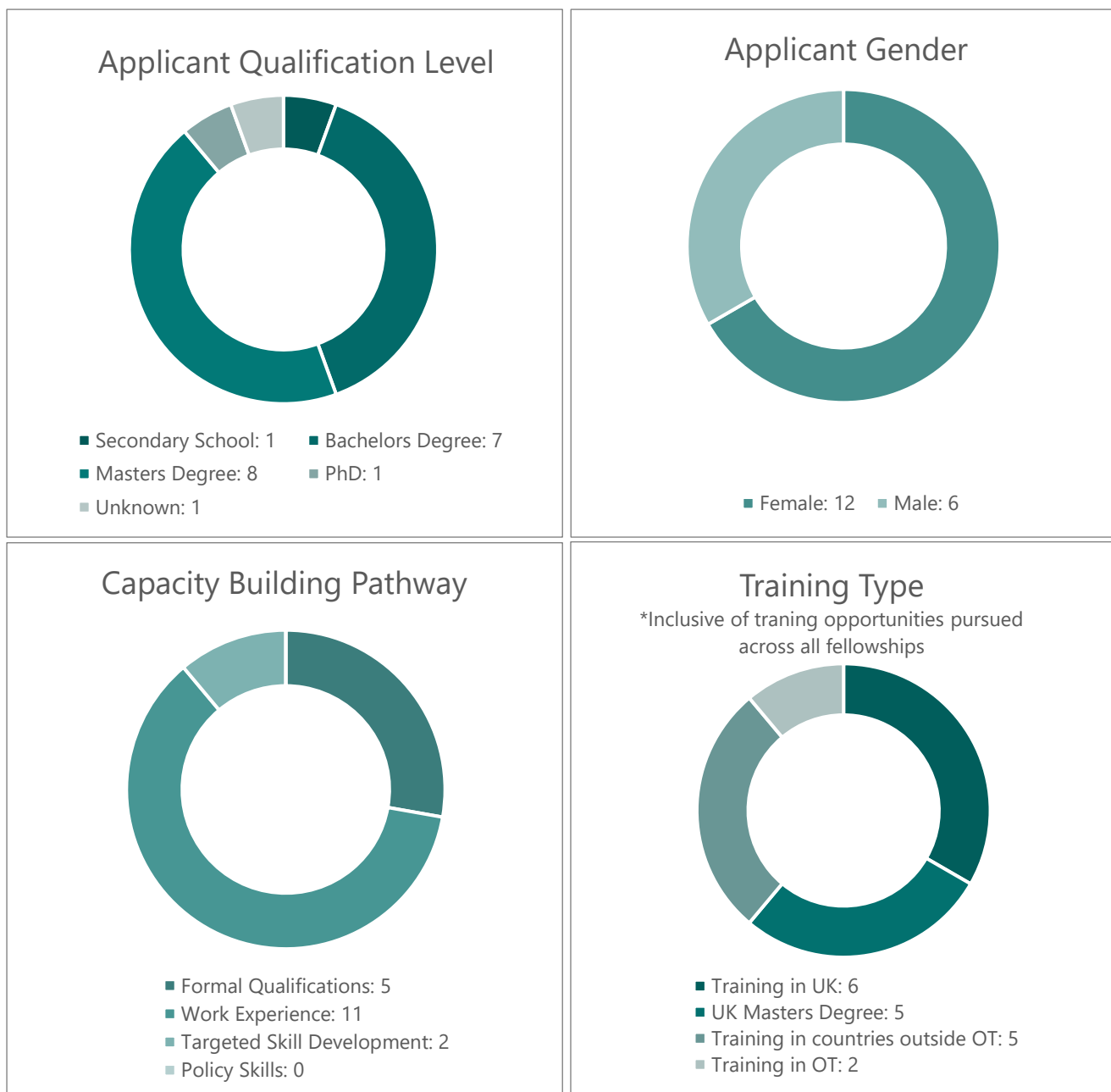


Figure 4. Applicant qualification levels, gender, capacity building pathways and training types

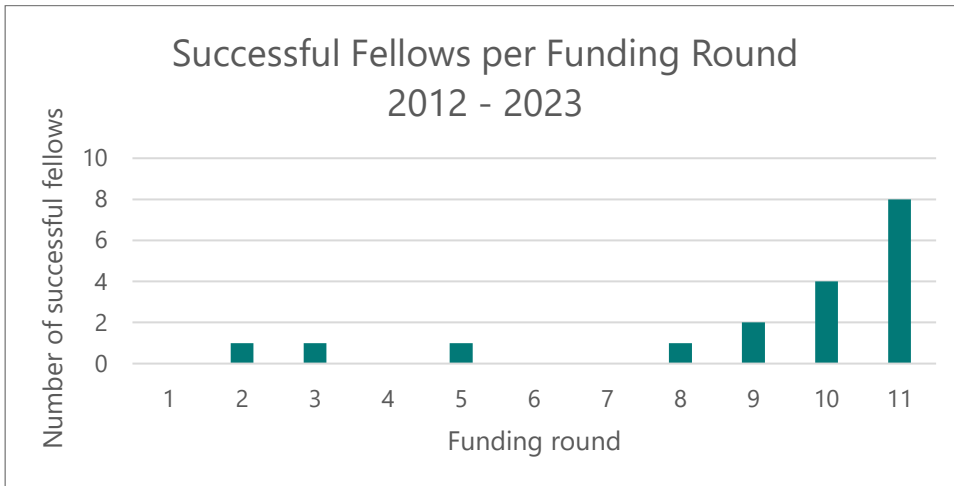


Figure 5. Successful fellows per Darwin Plus Funding Round (2012-2023)

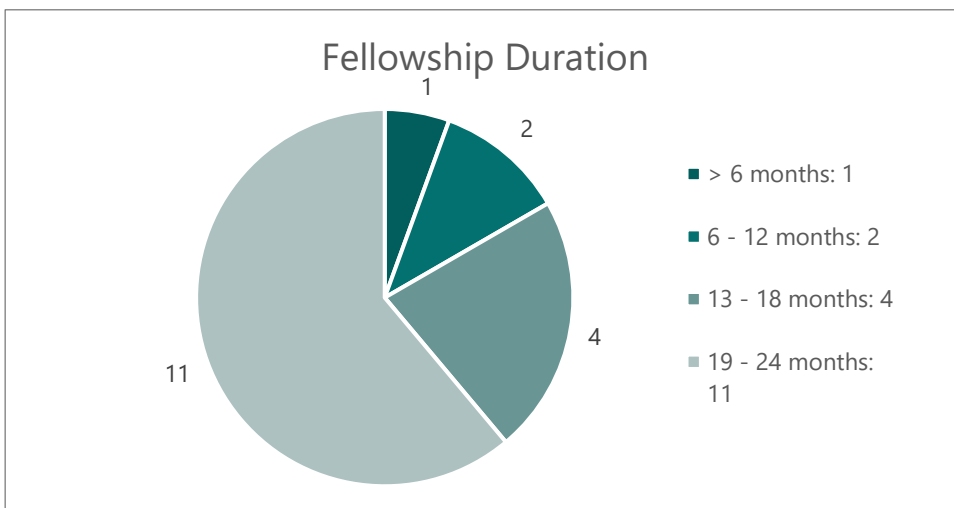


Figure 6. Fellowship duration

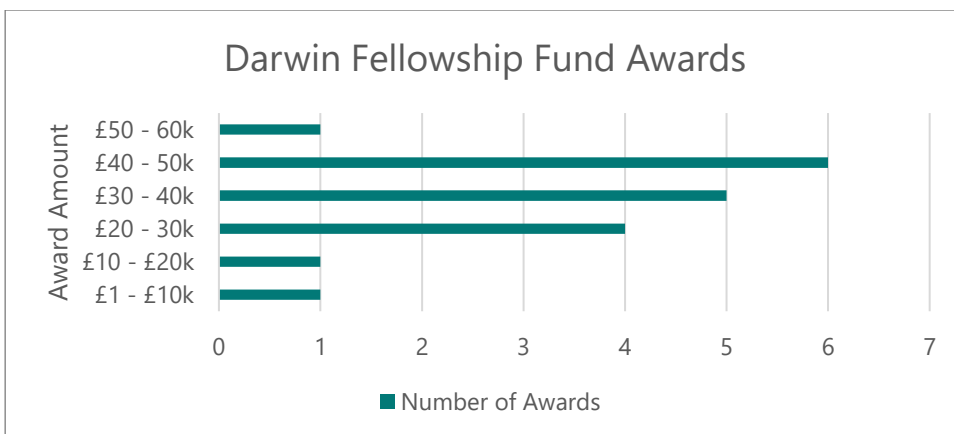


Figure 7. Darwin Fellowship funding amounts