



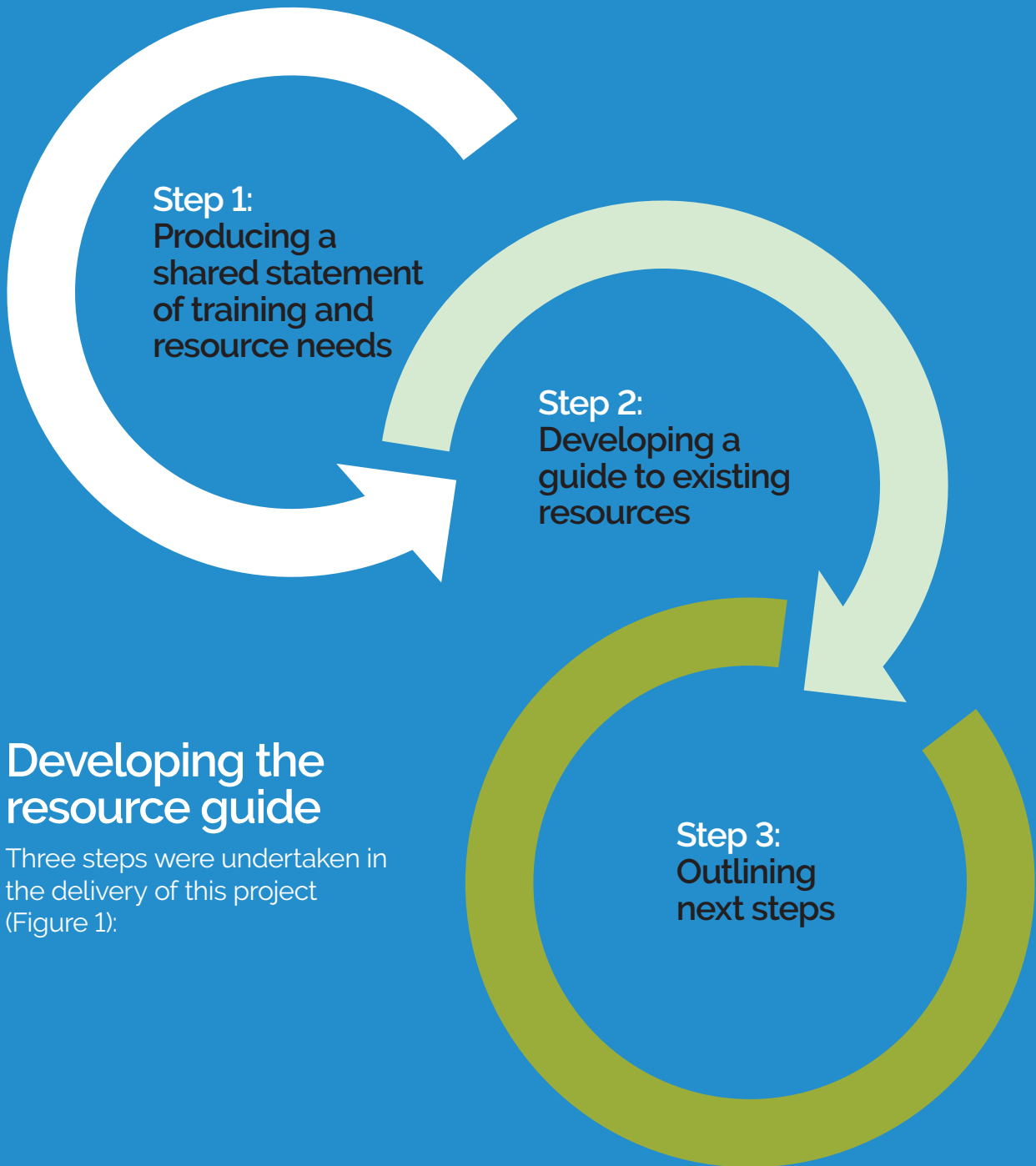
# Developing social science resources for non-social scientists within environmental organisations

## Why the need for social science resources?

There is an urgent need for non-social scientists within environmental organisations to be better equipped to engage with the social sciences to advance their use in addressing climate and environmental challenges. Non-social scientists leading interventions, programmes and policies already use the social sciences to understand important issues around human relations with nature and nature recovery. While this is encouraging, it is too often carried out without proper consideration of ethical issues, and inappropriate use of social science methods and data production. This highlights the limited capacity of social science teams (which are small but growing within environmental organisations) to currently support this increasing interest and to advise on best practice.

## What were our aims?

The project aimed to advance the use of the social sciences in addressing environmental challenges. It sought to do this by improving the understanding of the social sciences among non-social scientists within environmental organisations through the development and piloting of a social science resource guide. This initiative was funded through the ACCESS Flex Fund and led by Natural England and Newcastle University. It was delivered collaboratively with support from project partners in the Natural Environment Social Research Network (NESRN), including the Environment Agency, Forest Research, Natural Resources Wales and NatureScot, and the National Centre for Research Methods.



## Developing the resource guide

Three steps were undertaken in the delivery of this project (Figure 1):

**Step 1.** Scoping research with both social scientists (focus groups with 17 people) and non-social scientists (survey of 128 staff) in 13 different environmental organisations was undertaken. This provided insights around current use and understanding of the social sciences, and where greater support is needed.

**Step 2.** Based on the findings of the scoping, accessible and credible existing resources were collated and formatted within a PDF guide, and transferred to a more interactive SharePoint site for piloting (Figure 2). The guide was piloted with

non-social scientists (n=15) and improved based on their feedback. The final PDF guide is designed to be used by social scientists as a tool/template (e.g., for similar online sites) when supporting their organisations.

**Step 3.** Finally, partners were brought together to discuss how remaining training or resource needs not addressed by existing training resources can be prioritised and addressed through future collaborative or organisation-specific work. Recommendations are made for next steps.



# Social Science Resources

Figure 2: A screenshot of the Social Sciences SharePoint guide.

What is Social Science?

Learn more

Environmental Social Science

Examples of existing research

Commissioning Social Science Research

Quick links

### Plan and do social science research

The social sciences are a specialist skill. These resources are provided to 1) enable basic use of more straightforward and low risk social science methods by non-social scientists, and 2) as continued professional development for those with social science expertise. Doing social science research without the appropriate understanding and/or support, poses a risk to both participants and the organisation.

The [Social science planning checklist](#) will help you plan internal and contracted research projects →

Use the steps in the social science research process below to identify support at each stage. Click boxes to find out more.

Social research checklist in NE

This checklist summarises key steps and considerations to help you design good social research, whether internal or contracted work. This links to [NE's social science resource pages](#), covering NE-specific requirements, as well as broad good research practice.

(1) Scoping the need and defining your research question		Where to get help
1	<input type="checkbox"/> Have you... ...agreed on a clear research question/s to give clarity to all further steps?	Resource: <a href="#">research questions</a>
2	<input type="checkbox"/> ...checked whether existing research/publications can answer this question?	Resource: <a href="#">Scoping the evidence</a>
3	<input type="checkbox"/> ...for evaluation got a clear idea of what you expect to	Visit NE's Evaluation

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### Steps in the Social Research Process

1

Scope the need & define your research questions

✓ [Research questions](#)

✓ [Evidence reviews](#)

✓ [Planning evaluation](#)

2

Setting a clear plan for your research

✓ [Social research methods](#)

✓ [Sampling and recruitment](#)

✓ [Analysis plan](#)

✓ [Inclusive research](#)

3

IMPORTANT Ethical considerations & data management compliance

✓ [Research ethics](#)

✓ [Data management](#)

## Next steps

From our scoping, we have gained a range of insights to inform what more might be needed to grow understanding of the social sciences within environmental organisations. These are summarised here as suggested next steps:

### Creation of new cross-organisational resources:

There are a range of areas in which improved resources would be beneficial and could not be provided by collating and consolidating existing resources. This includes compiling a checklist of things to consider to begin the research process, working examples and case studies of

environmental social science and training in less commonly used methods.

### Increasing the accessibility of resources:

By hosting of these resources and any further developments on an external website, it will be possible to share them with wider organisations with a growing remit around social science. A user-friendly online format, ready to share will allow them to be an immediate resource and allow for more efficient on-going maintenance and updating of the resources.

### **Capturing user experience and on-going support needs:**

As part of the future development of these resources, it will be important to continue to use the established NESRN to continue to ask 'what more is needed?' and 'what new areas do you need support in?'. This will change with time and with developments in both social science and the environmental field but will also change based on the understanding of our audience. It was notable that a number of those piloting the resources did have some experience in social science and were looking for higher-level resources and training, as well as the basics.

**Growing social science expertise:** The need to acknowledge the social sciences as a technical skill was reiterated by social scientists taking part in this research. However, in a landscape where demand for social science is growing, but roles focusing on social science are few and far between, we must consider how we increase social science expertise for those embedded in wider teams. Could this be through the funding

of social science courses for natural scientists alongside work? Or instead the co-development of online or in-person training courses accessible to environmental organisations?



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Both the Social Science Resources Guide and accompanying report are available at: JP060 Edition 1 Developing Social Science Resources Report - JP060 ([naturalengland.org.uk](http://naturalengland.org.uk))