



**Cymdeithas
Tirweddau**
Cenedlaethol

**National
Landscapes**
Association

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
Sustainable Development Fund Evaluation
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Executive Summary

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) are designated exceptional landscapes whose distinctive character and natural beauty are precious enough to be safeguarded in the national interest. The Welsh Government Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) was established to support innovative, sustainable projects in the 5 AONBs in Wales, providing the opportunity for local communities and organisations to support delivery of the AONB Management Plans.

The fund has been in place for some time, during which there has been considerable change from a legislative and policy context in Wales. Consequently, the National Association for AONBs (NAAONB), which supports the network of AONBs throughout the UK, commissioned [Catrin Evans Consultancy](#) to undertake an evaluation of the AONB SDF in Wales.

The evaluation looked at projects delivered during the 2018-21 period and included document review and extensive engagement with the AONB Teams, key partners and grant recipients, alongside visits to a selection of projects across each area.

The evaluation found positive and extensive delivery against local and national priorities, with projects clearly reflective of local areas and AONB priorities. The funding framework, which provides local administration of Welsh Government funding, has provided opportunity for closer collaboration between AONB partnerships and local communities, acting as a strong enabler for local, community focused delivery.

The fund has demonstrated excellent value for money, averaging an intervention rate of 31% across the evaluation period, with many broader outcomes often not captured within the current reporting mechanisms. There is scope to better demonstrate the value and impact of the fund through more targeted reporting and, in places, to target delivery against some key priority areas.

A number of recommendations are provided in this report, to build on the exceptional work already delivered as part of the fund, and to ensure the full impact of delivery is captured and demonstrated as delivering against key priorities, both nationally and locally.

Declaration of Interest: Catrin Evans is a Trustee for Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales, who are grant recipients for Gower AONB SDF. Consequently, it was agreed that WTSWW would not be included as projects to be visited for further evaluation. In the Wye Valley, Gwent Wildlife Trust were included for a visit, but notification was made to GWT on Catrin's role.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) are designated exceptional landscapes whose distinctive character and natural beauty are precious enough to be safeguarded in the national interest.

AONBs are protected and enhanced for nature, people, business and culture, established under the Countryside Act of 1949. There are 46 AONBs in the UK, 5 of which are in Wales, covering 4% of Wales' land area. They are similar, in aims and purposes, to National Parks; however, whilst National Parks are managed by National Park Authorities, in the case of AONBs, this function is undertaken by dedicated teams within the relevant Local Authorities for each area.

Designation of AONBs is the responsibility of Natural Resources Wales (NRW) in Wales, who retain an advisory role for designated landscapes and were instrumental in establishing the Sustainable Development Fund in Wales.

The Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) was established in 2001, as a means to support innovative, sustainable projects in the 5 AONBs in Wales. It is coordinated by Welsh Government, with guidance provided to Local Authority AONB Teams on how it should be administered.

The fund has been in place for over 20 years. During this time, there have been some reviews of the fund and updates to the guidance, however little has changed in terms of its core goals, despite considerable change from a legislative and policy context.

The National Association for AONBs (NAAONB), which supports the network of AONBs throughout the UK, commissioned [Catrin Evans Consultancy](#) to undertake an evaluation of the AONB SDF, setting out a requirement to:

- contextualise SDF within the current political and economic environment
- Explore effectiveness of mechanisms that are in place to administer the fund
- Set out the impact of the fund within each AONB, providing a summary of their alignment with the main purposes of the grant and current political environment
- Commentary of how SDF works alongside other funding provided to AONBs
- Provide a summary of key party testimony on the effectiveness of SDF and what changes could be implemented.

1.2 Methodology

The following approach was taken in evaluation of the fund:

- A desktop review of grant documentation, criteria and respective AONB Management Plans.
- Review of current policy and legislative framework, against which SDF would be expected to deliver
- Extensive discussion with individual AONB Teams and key partners *

- Desktop evaluation of projects within the 2018-21 period, based on SDF annual reports provided to Welsh Government
- Project visits to a selection of projects across the five AONB areas*, to obtain feedback on grant application, claim and reporting processes, assess the impact of the fund more directly, to the applicant, local community and against Welsh Government priorities.

* Appendix 1 provides a list of partners and grant recipients engaged in the evaluation process. Feedback from stakeholders has been extremely valuable, informing the findings of this evaluation. A summary of the key points has been collated and provided to the client as background information. In order to encourage honest and open feedback, agreement was made with stakeholders that these would not be included as part of this report.

1.3 Policy and Legislative Framework

The purposes of the grant are summarised in Section 2.2 and set out in more detail in Appendix 2. The first purpose sets out a broad requirement to deliver against Welsh Government's current agenda for the environment and sustainability, providing a specific reference to the **Well-Being and Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015** and the **Natural Resources Policy** (which facilitates the implementation of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016).

There are a number of legislative measures, strategies and plans that fall within the context of Welsh Government's current agenda for environment and sustainability, alongside those already highlighted within the guidance. These include a [Clean Air Plan for Wales](#), setting out Welsh Government's commitment to improving air quality, requirements for sustainable management of water, and the [Beyond Recycling](#) Strategy, highlighting the commitment and steps to transition to a circular, low carbon economy.

Of particular significance, Welsh Government has declared both nature and climate emergencies, highlighting its commitment to these key policy areas and providing an indication of future priorities, alongside the Well-being and Future Generations Act. Further detail on these specific policy areas is summarised below.

[Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act, 2015](#)

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, 2015, was put in place to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. The Act lays out seven well-being goals (listed in Appendix 2), which public bodies must work towards achieving, and five sustainable development principles to adopt.

This is a key piece of legislation for Wales and underpins the approach required to be taken across the public sector to improve the well-being of Wales.

[Environment \(Wales\) Act, 2016](#)

This legislation puts in place a duty for public bodies to maintain and enhance biodiversity, promoting the resilience of ecosystems, in the exercise of their functions. This duty is referred to as the Sct. 6 Duty. This is a vital piece of legislation which is intended to embed

action for biodiversity into the core of public service delivery. Providing positive action for biodiversity through delivery of the SDF provides effective demonstration of the Sect. 6 Duty.

As part of Wales' commitment to tackling climate change, the Act also provided a stronger legislative framework to reduce greenhouse gases, subsequently updated in 2021 to set a net zero target for Welsh Government for 2050.

[Prosperity for All: A Low Carbon Wales](#)

The Plan sets out the foundations for Wales to transition to a low carbon nation, pulling together existing policies relating to decarbonisation. Whilst extensive in its approach, of particular relevance here are Policy 20: *Support the public sector to baseline, monitor and report progress towards carbon neutrality* and Policy 15: *Provide funding to enable action on climate change in schools and communities*.

Delivering on Policy 20, SDF provides an opportunity to support efforts to decarbonise locally, whilst also demonstrating that it is delivering against Welsh Government's policy to provide funding to enable action for climate change.

[National Policies for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience](#)

Nationally, there are a number of documents which set out the framework for delivery to improve biodiversity and ecosystem resilience across Wales.

The [State of Natural Resources Report](#) (SoNaRR), produced by Natural Resources Wales, provides the most up to date account of the status of biodiversity in Wales. The [Natural Resources Policy](#), provides a policy framework by the Welsh Government, priorities from which are set out locally through **Area Statements**. The [Nature Recovery Action Plan](#) is the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan for Wales.

[Area Statements](#)

Welsh Government's Natural Resources Policy sets out the key challenges and opportunities in Wales in relation to our natural environment. NRW are responsible for the production of Area Statements, that specify local priorities, risks and opportunities to implement the priorities of the Natural Resources Policy. Wales has been split into seven areas and the AONBs will fall within different regions. The themes of the Area Statements, whilst distinct and targeted for each area, can be broadly categorised into some key areas of work, which include:

- Building ecosystem resilience and improving biodiversity
- Improving health through connections with nature
- Mitigation and adaption to the climate emergency
- Sustainable management of land, water and air.

[Biodiversity Deep Dive: recommendations](#)

In October, 2022, Welsh Government published the [Biodiversity Deep Dive: recommendations](#), a set of collective actions that they can take to support meaningful delivery of the [Convention on Biological Diversity's Framework for Nature](#), including the '30

by 30' goal¹. It includes an extensive range of recommendations and provides a valuable insight into proposed and emerging legislative, policy and funding changes.

It recognises the potential for designated landscapes to deliver for nature and 30 by 30, setting out a commitment, in the short term, to support National Parks and AONBs to embed nature restoration into their strategic planning; In the long term, stating an intention to realign designated landscape priorities to enhance and accelerate nature recovery delivery.

Valued and Resilient: Welsh Government's Priorities for AONBs and National Parks

This statement was issued by Welsh Government to set out their priorities for AONBs and National Parks in Wales. It includes 10 cross-cutting priority themes which provide a consistent framework for designated landscapes, whilst allowing for flexibility on management and delivery within each area. The ten themes are categorised within four goals:

- **Valued Places:** ensuring a diverse cross section of society are engaged and involved in decision making,
- **Resilient Environments:** acting as exemplars of sustainable management of natural resources; supporting efforts to reverse the decline in nature and contributing to a low carbon economy for Wales,
- **Resilient Communities:** realising the economic potential, growing tourism and outdoor recreation and contributing to a thriving Welsh language,
- Adopting **Resilient Ways of Working:** championing innovation and collaboration between, and within, designated landscapes and also with non-designated areas.

1.4 Other Funding Mechanisms

Sustainable Landscape, Sustainable Places (SLSP) – Landscape Fund

The SDF is part of a wider funding package provided by Welsh Government to designated landscapes, as part of the Sustainable Landscapes, Sustainable Places (SLSP) – Landscape Fund.

The grant funding is being used to fund projects around 4 key themes: decarbonisation, nature recovery, sustainable tourism and projects supporting a green Covid recovery; as well as support for larger scale collaborative projects across multiple landscapes.

The SLSP provides greater level of investment in capital schemes which deliver against these themes, with individual AONBs taking forward landscape scale nature recovery programmes, alongside decarbonisation schemes, heritage, access and visitor improvement.

Revenue Funding

Additional Welsh Government funding to increase AONB resilience for 3 years will provide additional capacity within the team, which will indirectly support delivery and collaboration

¹ 30 by 30 refers to the Welsh Government target to protect, and effectively manage, at least 30% of our land, freshwater and sea for nature, by 2030.

in relation to the SDF. Revenue funding has previously been provided by NRW to support delivery of the Management Plans; however, it's understood that changes currently being implemented include greater focus on project implementation and delivery of outcomes.

Future funding for staff has been raised as a concern, with the potential to impact on an ability to deliver SDF, as well as other areas of AONB delivery and delivery of capital schemes.

National Park Sustainable Development Funds

The National Park Sustainable Development Funds are now financed and administered independently by each of the Welsh National Parks. Consequently, they have evolved and adapted to meet local requirements, and are now quite different in their approaches and funding criteria. Some key differences include:

Eryri SDF is now run as Cronfa Comisiynu Eryri. It is a commissioning fund, which is intended to facilitate projects that support delivery of the Management Plan. A Community Fund is still in place, which is capital and more aligned to the SLSP, and a small fund (Cronfa Pethau Bychain) provides funding of up to £500.

Pembrokeshire Coast SDF is now focused on the climate emergency, providing funding for any community led projects that contribute towards a reduction in carbon and help respond to the climate emergency. An overview is provided on their [website](#).

Bannau Brycheiniog SDF remains more closely aligned to the AONB SDF schemes, with similar aims, criteria and processes, details of which are set out quite clearly on their [website](#).

Reflection on SDF

The SDF is a flexible fund, which can be utilised to support local priorities for local communities and is well-placed to support delivery of the AONB Management Plans. It's noted that the multi-year offer has been very beneficial and there is a strong desire that this approach stays in place.

In comparison to other funding mechanisms, AONB Teams have reported less constraint in alignment of projects with grant criteria, with the focused nature of other funds often limiting availability for some local priorities. The Fund is highly valued, both by project applicants and the AONB Teams themselves, providing the following feedback:

SDF has helped raise the profile of the team and of the AONB. Other grant funding has been more complex.

It feels like a partnership approach, with shared aims and objectives, which makes it easier to deliver. Allows individual AONBs to put their stamp on it.

SDF makes us relevant to communities, acts as a gateway into communities through ranger teams and other staff, and to business groups.

The fund can be used to deliver local projects. It is accessible to local communities as it's a simple process to go through.

It's good to see community groups and projects develop and we are able to see progress through the delivery of multi-year projects.

We've seen projects get more complex, with groups building their ambition. It's helped build capacity of groups.

The relationship with the applicant is very important to avoid submission of poor applications and the SDF process facilitates this relationship.

It gives a chance for organisations which don't have much funding to apply for smaller amounts of funding. It's a simple, non-bureaucratic, streamlined process.

2. Evaluation: SDF Processes

This section sets out the processes that are in place to administer the fund; key points and observations for which are provided in section 2.4.

An evaluation of the projects themselves, and their impact, are provided in section 3.

2.1 Overview of SDF

The SDF is a third-party grant, administered by Local Authority AONB Partnerships on behalf of Welsh Government. It is available to Local Authorities, voluntary, community and partnership groups and projects should be located within, or should directly benefit, the Welsh AONBs. It is intended to support innovative and sustainable projects in each of the 5 AONBs in Wales, providing an equal allocation to each area.

The 5 AONBs which are responsible for administration of the fund are Clwydian Range and Dee Valley (CRDV), Anglesey, Llŷn, Gower and Wye Valley.

The allocation to each AONB is currently £100K each year, 10% of which may be claimed by the Local Authority as administrative costs to deliver the scheme. Until a few years ago, the fund was awarded on an annual basis, before being increased to a 2-year offer, and at this stage, part of a 3-year funded offer.

Feedback from the AONB Teams has confirmed a marked improvement in their ability to administer the scheme as part of a 3-year offer, providing increased security for staff and projects, and the ability to provide projects with a more timely offer for delivery during the forthcoming financial year.

Guidance is provided by Welsh Government on administration of the scheme, including the purposes and delivery requirements. An updated version of the guidance was provided in 20/21, having been reviewed in collaboration with the AONB Teams. The changes to the guidance included more explicit, or new, references to grant priorities (Well-being of Future Generations Act, Environment Act and the Valued and Resilient Priorities), a reduction in match funding requirements and a new section on composition of SDF assessment panels.

Further details on grant conditions and delivery requirements are set out in the offer letters that are provided by Welsh Government to each AONB Team.

2.1.1 Management Plan Objectives

The grant guidance and conditions clearly state a requirement to deliver against the objectives of the AONB Management Plans. These have been set by each individual AONB and will be reflective of local priorities and characteristics.

Each of the Management Plans provide a comprehensive description of the AONB, its landscape, the habitats and ecosystems, the economy, local cultures and historical features, set out as features and special qualities of the AONB. Management objectives, that are necessary to conserve and enhance features and qualities of the AONB, are detailed, providing a framework against which the SDF is required to deliver.

2.2 Welsh Government Guidance

As set out in the guidance document, ‘the SDF should support projects that work to enhance and conserve natural beauty, wildlife, culture, landscape, land use and community within the context of the goals and sustainable development principles in the Well-being of Future Generations Act, and the priorities set out in Valued and Resilient: The Welsh Government’s Priorities for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks’.

The guidance sets out a number of requirements that projects are expected to meet, or deliver against; summarised below, and set out in more detail in Appendix 1.

- **The purposes:** environment and sustainability, build capacity in communities, awareness raising for residents and visitors, deliver purposes of the AONB and objectives of the Management Plan
- Must also support **primary purpose of the AONB** – to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape
- **And Secondary aims** – promote sustainable forms of economic and social development and recreational demands (as long as it is consistent with the conservation of the area and with the needs of agriculture, forestry and other land use)
- One or more of the **priorities set out in Valued and Resilient** (Valued places, resilient environments, resilient communities and resilient ways of working)
- **Well-being Goals**
- **Natural Resources Policy** to be considered in developing and assessing SDF projects. Three national priorities: delivering nature-based solutions, increasing renewable energy and resource efficiency and taking a place-based approach
- Partnerships – projects that encompass **joint working should be prioritised**.

The guidance goes on to set out requirements, including for awareness raising, the application and assessment process for project applicants, the assessment criteria,

timetables, monitoring, evaluation and reporting. Whilst unnecessary to reproduce excessive detail from the guidance here, it would be worth highlighting the following points:

- The assessment panels are expected to provide a balance of interests across social, community, economic and environmental sectors, with members required to keep themselves abreast of aims and purposes of the SDF and the AONB, and to attend any training that is provided.
- A refresh of membership is encouraged, setting out maximum terms and membership review, recognising that there may be pre-existing membership arrangements which could impact on this requirement.
- Assessment processes must be transparent and clear to applicants.
- Reporting guidelines and recommendations are provided, stating the importance of these reports in promoting and providing evidence on the success of the scheme within Welsh Government and to Ministers.

2.2.1 Grant Offer Letters

Alongside the guidance, the offer letter that is provided to each AONB Team sets out the grant conditions, which include the requirements to 'use the funding solely for the purposes set out in Schedule 1 (the 'Purposes')'. These purposes differ slightly from those set out in the guidance, referring directly to the purposes, Well-being goals and Natural Resources Policy (as in the guidance); omitting reference to 'Valued and Resilient' and joint working; and introducing specific reference to the Sustainable Development Principles.

Discussion with AONB Officers highlighted that perceived security of funding and timing of the offer had the potential to impact on project delivery. It was noted that communication between the Welsh Government Designated Landscapes Team and the AONB Teams was extremely positive, and instrumental in minimising issues or concerns in receiving formal confirmation.

2.3 AONB Grant Administration

The resources, structures and processes that are in place to deliver the SDF vary across each AONB, with processes having evolved in response to local structures and governance. These differences include staff resources, with team size ranging significantly, and some AONBs working cross-boundary, across countries as well as across counties.

2.3.1 Promotion of the Grant to Prospective Applicants

Initial awareness of the grant as a funding source largely fell into two categories: online presence and word of mouth / existing relationships with the AONB Teams or Partnerships, with the latter being by far the most frequently cited by grant recipients.

In terms of an online presence, each of the AONBs do have a dedicated section on their websites which provides information on the fund, its purpose, eligibility, points of contact, etc. In some areas this extends to examples of projects which have been funded previously, activity on social media and inclusion of more detailed information in newsletters, such as in Llyn AONB's annual newsletter, [Llygad Llyn](#).

Whilst recognising that this evaluation was undertaken during a time which wasn't particularly relevant for promotion, evidence of active promotion of the fund was limited. This is substantiated by discussion with grant recipients, who almost unanimously reported that they were aware of the fund through previous involvement with AONB Teams or through word of mouth, either through contacts with other projects or through involvement with other networks. Furthermore, through discussion with AONB Teams, it's clear that active promotion is not a priority in some areas, due to sufficient interest in the fund and a tendency for it to be oversubscribed.

2.3.2 Accessing Grant Information

With the exception of Anglesey, the grant application documents themselves are not available online, with a requirement for prospective applicants to contact the team to discuss the project first. Where this is the case, there are a number of reasons given for this approach, including:

- providing the opportunity to guide and support prospective applicants in developing their project ideas (and thereby avoid submission of applications which may not meet the grant requirements)
- potential for engagement and the opportunity to build relationships with prospective applicants
- potential to signpost to other funding opportunities or delivery through alternative means / collaboration
- avoidance of unnecessary disappointment where projects wouldn't meet the grant criteria.

In the case of Anglesey, prospective applicants are strongly advised to contact the team to discuss the project prior to submitting an application, an approach which is reported to be working well.

2.3.3 Documents and Guidance

Each of the AONBs provide appropriate documentation to support the grant application process. Whilst these are largely similar, there are some differences and have clearly been adapted to fit within local delivery mechanisms, as would be expected.

Comparable documents are:

- Grant application form
- Grant guidelines / guidance
- Criteria tick list or score sheet (not for all)
- Claim form (largely financial)

The grant guidelines provide an overview of grant criteria, which are largely based on criteria set out within Welsh Government guidance. Whilst some have been updated to reflect recent guidance updates, this is not the case for all.

Feedback from project applicants did indicate cases where support was needed to complete the form, particularly in relation to questions requiring knowledge of management plan policies or delivery against national priorities.

The following documents are also provided:

- A time recording sheet by Anglesey
- An outputs and outcomes form by CRDV
- A progress and completion form by Wye Valley
- A 'check before claiming' form by Llŷn
- Although not provided to applicants, Gower also utilise an 'assessment of application' form, which is provided to the panel, which provides an overarching summary of each project application and what it will deliver.

The 'outputs and outcomes' form by CRDV and 'progress and completion form' by Wye Valley both serve as templates for an end of project report. Whilst there are many comparable headings, there are a number of additional ones included in the Wye Valley document, such as 'challenges faced and how they were overcome', 'lessons learnt', and 'any examples of good practice or innovation to share'. There is no template provided by the remaining AONBs, although there is a requirement for a written report to be provided for Anglesey and Gower, with some guidance provided verbally or by referencing back to existing documents (such as the application form itself).

2.3.4 Staff Support

Grant enquiries and applications are made directly to the AONB Teams, where an identified member of staff will support that applicant in refining the project (if necessary), signposting to the relevant policy links (such as the management plan) and ensuring that the form has been completed properly.

Feedback from project applicants has demonstrated an overwhelming sense of appreciation and value that is placed on the role of the AONB Teams. This was a strong and recurring theme across each of the 5 areas. In each AONB, the SDF leads (and teams) were reported as being approachable, supportive and helpful from the start of the process through to project delivery. This was particularly evident for some of the smaller groups or organisations, with less experience of having gone through this grant process.

Whilst there is a nominated person who acts as lead on the SDF for each team, this function is consistently undertaken as part of a wider role for that member of staff. The estimated percentage of that time spent does vary across the AONB areas, generally 20/30% - 50%, with one area reporting a lower figure of 5/10%. In addition, there is input from other members of the team, either as part of managerial support or by collaboration with ranger or other services.

Each of the AONBs Teams do draw down an element of the permitted 10% for administrative costs, although not always the full amount, and in the case of CRDV, it was

only 5% during the latter part of this evaluation period. Although the administrative cost to Local Authorities to administer the grant hasn't been calculated, in most cases, it does appear that the cost exceeds the amount that can be claimed through the grant.

The administrative contribution is a vital element of the fund, without which, there would be a risk of Local Authorities not being able to administer the SDF. There are examples of other funds which offer slightly higher levels, however on balance, provided there is no reduction, the current level appears to provide a reasonable contribution, given the positive contribution that it makes in supporting delivery of the AONB Management Plans.

Discussion with each team, however, has identified that funding to maintain staff resources is a concern, particularly in light of changes to NRW funding streams, seeing an increasing shift towards capital and project funding. Whilst other funding streams don't directly relate to delivery of the SDF, they will impact on staff resources more generally, which will invariably impact on effectiveness of SDF delivery more widely.

2.3.5 Grant Decision Making – Delegated Power

Where the grant application falls under the threshold of £3K, AONB Teams have delegated power to determine the application directly, and this is often the case. In the case of CRDV, there is a greater tendency to also take the smaller projects to the assessment panels, the given reason for which is to help build relationships with the panel.

All projects over the threshold are taken to panel to be determined. Whilst this is generally done as part of a meeting (pre-scheduled or called in response to a sufficient number of submissions), at times this may be done by e-mail if there is need for a quick turnaround.

There is potential to increase the threshold to reflect increasing costs, however in reality, the majority of projects are either significantly over the threshold, or comfortably below, and therefore wouldn't significantly influence the number of projects that go to panel. It would be beneficial to keep this under review, responding to any need identified by the AONB Teams in the future.

2.3.6 Assessment Panels – Composition and Governance

Composition of the panels are adapted to fit within existing governance structures, however broadly speaking, seek to provide a representation of public, private and voluntary sector. In addition to these, both NRW and the AONB Teams are members of the panels as advisors.

In some cases, the balance of representation is strictly adhered to, as is the case with Anglesey, with one representative of each, having gone through an application process, and Wye Valley, who's panel is a constituted sub-group of the AONB Partnership, with 6 members: 2 public, 2 private, 2 voluntary. CRDV, which has a larger panel with representatives from the Joint Committee and Partnership, maintains the same composition across its 9 members (excluding NRW and the AONB Team as advisors). In Gower, there is an approximate 50/50 split between county councillors and external stakeholders, whilst Llyn's panel largely includes councillors (county and community / town) with some voluntary sector members.

What is less clear is the composition or balance of interests across social, community, economic and environmental sectors. Whilst it can be assumed that elements, such as community and social considerations would be represented by councillors (community and county), it's possible that certain areas (such as environment or culture) could be under-represented. Whilst it's expected that these areas of expertise would be provided by the advisory roles provided by NRW and the AONB Team, it remains the case that representation within the voting members would be beneficial.

A recurring theme of the panels is the length of term of membership. There is little evidence of intake of new members or natural turnover of membership. In addition, the role of chair appears to remain fairly static in most cases. The more recent update to the Welsh Government grant guidelines has sought to address this, introducing guidance on the length of term of members, as well as the composition.

As of yet, there do not appear to be any changes that have arisen from this change to the guidance, with exception to Gower, who are currently updating the grants panel. Discussion with the AONB Teams has indicated they have no opposition to the approach advocated in the guidance, although Anglesey have expressed some concern on ability to recruit new members. In addition, Llŷn have reported that the guidance on this isn't very clear.

2.3.7 Assessment Panels – Project Presentation

By and large, the project applications are presented by the AONB Teams, although this is not always the case. Some project applicants have reported that they personally presented their projects in Gower and Llŷn, and CRDV have reported that some complex projects are asked to make a presentation.

Whilst many project applicants were comfortable with their interaction with the panel, there are some cases where this wasn't the case. Although these reports are in the minority, they do provide important feedback which should be highlighted here. One applicant for Gower reported the process as 'gruelling' and felt that some of the questions indicated a lack of understanding of potential success of their project, although it should be noted this was the only such report for this area. Feedback from an applicant at the Llŷn panel felt that the questions that were asked of them were irrelevant to the project and the grant criteria, and challenging in their nature. As a result, they questioned whether certain members had read their application or the grant guidelines. Discussion with other attendees to this panel has corroborated a confrontational nature to the questioning and indicated some challenging behaviour by some well-established panel members.

Despite some negative feedback on this approach, overall, the opportunity to present project ideas is valuable, giving the applicant a suitable platform to communicate the value of the project in their own words, and also respond to any questions that arise. It is important, however, to ensure that this can be done in a way that is not felt to be confrontational and that applicants do feel at ease. In addition, some thought could be given to providing this opportunity only where it would add value to the process, or where it's a more complex project and therefore likely to result in more questions by the panel.

2.3.8 Application Decision and Outcomes

Generally, the majority of projects that reach the panels are supported. This is not to say that there isn't sufficient scrutiny by the panel, rather, it's clear that the AONB Teams have provided the relevant support to ensure that submitted projects are of a good standard. Where a project does not meet grant criteria, or isn't sufficiently developed, applicants will generally be signposted elsewhere or encouraged to delay submission in order to further develop the project.

In addition, where funding allocations are already used up, submissions to panel may be delayed until subsequent years, or a project applicant may be told to delay submission. Clearly efforts are made by AONB Teams to manage expectations and balance grant budgets to minimise disappointment to applicants. An evaluation wasn't carried out on whether unsuccessful applicants, or applicants who are encouraged to delay, are reported to panel, however there was no reference of these in the annual reports.

Decision making is informed, in most cases, by a check list or scoring sheet, a general discussion, followed by the decision. This is supported, in the case of Gower, by the 'assessment of application' form. The check list is based on a set of criteria, including 'core criteria', which must be met, and 'other' criteria, which are not all mandatory.

Most of the criteria lists are similar, but there are some differences, indicating that this is something that was developed in the early days of SDF, with the reference to Agenda 21 providing an indication of the timescale since this document was developed. The criteria for Wye Valley and Gower are reflected in the grant guidance documents and are more closely aligned to current grant guidance provided by Welsh Government; these are not set out as a separate 'check list', whilst CRDV, Llŷn and Anglesey provide these to applicants as criteria check lists.

Feedback from some project applicants has indicated some lack of clarity on how projects would be scored or prioritised. One example has been encountered of a project being turned down where they were informed that 'the project was not prioritised by the panel', and another where they were offered a reduced grant offer, without a clear understanding of why.

Discussion with the AONB Teams has also indicated that more up to date criteria and / or guidance that could be shared with applicants would be beneficial.

Decisions are reported back to applicants by the AONB Teams, and with exception to the points made above, are reported as being timely and positive. Where there is a need to wait for more formal paperwork of confirmation, verbal notification is generally made by the team. Formal confirmation of success is provided in the form of an offer letter, which sets out the project delivery and grant claim requirements, including any conditions that may have been imposed by the panel.

2.3.9 Project Grant Claims

In line with Welsh Government procedures, applicants are provided with the opportunity to claim twice through the year, in November and February. Applicants are required to

provide the necessary evidence, in the form of invoices, receipts, time sheets, etc. Discussion with project recipients and AONB Teams did not indicate any issues in this respect, although there was recognition that the process did require a significant commitment of time for AONB Teams to chase up and pull together the relevant information. The value of setting out the requirements early on was noted, with Anglesey reporting improvements to the process having set out claim requirements more clearly within the offer letters. Again, project applicants reported positively on the support that was available, very much valuing the ability to speak to an individual where they had already established a working relationship.

Although not impacting on the overall success of the SDF scheme, a couple of observations were made on internal working practices:

- One project from Anglesey reported a significant gap between project spend (July) and receiving the funds in February, causing a concern with cash flow.
- Wye Valley and Gower are able to provide the option for some projects to receive funding up front, however appear to be the only AONBs that are currently offering this. This approach has also been adopted by Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority in administration of their SDF and some established funders such as National Lottery Heritage Fund. Whilst recognising that this will be a matter for each individual Local Authority to consider, it's felt that adopting such an approach could increase accessibility to this fund for some smaller organisations.

2.3.10 Annual Grant Reports

Each AONB is required to provide a project report to Welsh Government each August, following the end of the previous financial year. This is generally felt by AONB Teams to be a suitable timescale in which to write the reports. The reports provide a summary of the decisions taken and processes followed, a financial summary and detail on individual projects. The Welsh Government grant guidance does provide a suggested reporting structure for the fund, which covers key areas, including how the projects deliver against key policy areas.

The AONB Teams are responsible for delivery of these report and they are largely informed by the information that is presented by individual grant recipients. The format of this reporting (as set out in 'Documents and Guidance') is informed by a template in Wye Valley and CRDV, but a more flexible approach in Anglesey and Gower, with reporting in Llŷn sometimes relying on discussion over the phone or visits.

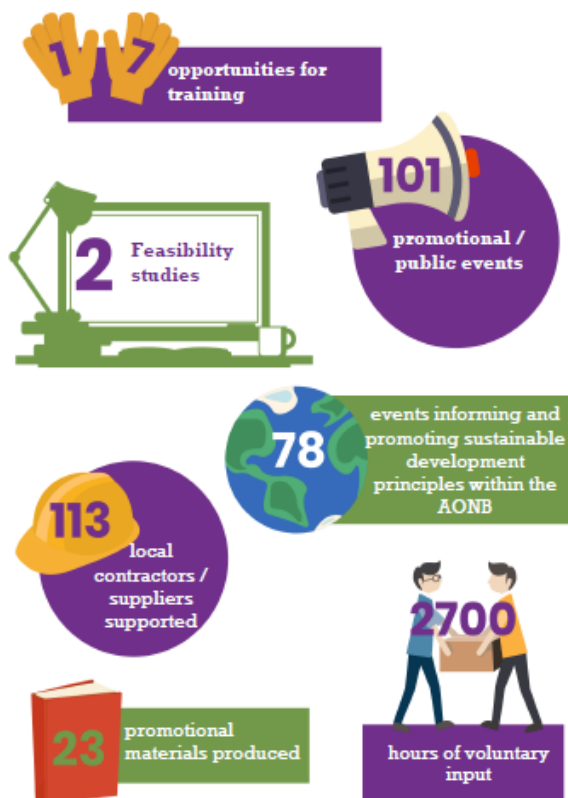
Discussion with project recipients indicates that most would welcome (or do welcome) the provision of a template to follow, or at least guide the process. A degree of flexibility was requested as it was recognised that not all projects would necessarily be able to respond to all questions. Furthermore, some applicants felt that some more challenging questions (for examples, how projects deliver against policy and legislative frameworks) should be addressed by AONB Teams, rather than individual groups, particularly for smaller projects.

The detail and level of information that is presented to Welsh Government is variable across the 5 areas and sometimes within the reports, although key elements such as cost, match funding, project description and outputs and outcomes (in different formats) are generally covered. Where there has been greater level of detail provided by the grant recipient, this is apparent and has been pulled through into the annual reports, providing a more complete picture of the outcomes of the project. *N.B. Further detail on the detail of individual projects, provided in each Annual Report, is provided in Sct. 3.2.*

In some cases, where project funding resulted in a feasibility study or piloting of a new product (such as the Biotextile Feasibility Study) it's unclear whether these were provided to the AONB Team or included alongside the annual report. Whilst it may not be necessary to provide copies of all such reports to Welsh Government, some clarity on the conclusion of any such study would be helpful to demonstrate the value of the SDF investment.

Some reports were further enhanced by the use of infographics to portray the impact of the scheme as a whole. The images below, taken from the CRDV 2019/20 Report shares some clear and easy to extract figures, along with examples of delivery against well-being goals, which would be useful to help raise the profile of the fund locally and nationally.

Associated Noteworthy Outputs



Well-being Goals – how has SDF contributed in 2019/20?

In 2019 the panel considered how projects delivered for the Well-being of Future Generations Goals



A similar approach is currently being explored in Anglesey, who are looking at how the project and summary information can be presented in a more engaging manner, sharing alternative formats to previously submitted reports.

Cronfa Datblygu Cynaliadwy (CDC) Sustainable Development Fund (SDF)		2021/22	
12	Prosiect Projects	5	Ysgol Uwchradd Secondary Schools
£100,00	Wedi'i wario Expenditure	2	Ysgol Gynradd Primary Schools
2,000+	Cyfranogwyr (babi i 65oed+) Participants (baby to 65yrs+)	1	Swydd llawn amse wedi'i chreu Full-Time job creat
100+	Teithiau Tywys ac Ymweliadau Maes Guided Walks and Field Visits	3,400+	Dilynwyr y Cyfryng Cymdeithasol Social Media follow
		£144.69 - £26,802.04	Ystod mewn gwerth grant Range in grant value

Actif Wood Wales

Project Timetable: 1 year / 2021-22
Applicant: Coed Lleol/Small Woods
SDF Allocation: Total claimed £10,917.89



Project Aims

- To improve people's health and wellbeing through social prescribing regular activities in woodlands
- Provide training for activity leaders and partner organisations to ensure high quality activities and long-term sustainability
- To increase participants understanding of, and interest in the AONB

Key Information

- Sessions including:
- 55 Face to Face woodland sessions
 - 74 Drop-in groups
 - 72 Walking groups
 - 30 Local Zoom sessions
 - 209 Participants engaged in one or more activities/benefiting (168 Adults and 41 children)
- Training for leaders from Anglesey:
- 4 Outdoor First Aid
 - 4 Mental Health Awareness
 - 4 Walk Leader Training
 - 4 Best Practice Workshop



2.3.11 Promotion of successful projects

The Sustainable Development Fund, and its impact, does not appear to be particularly visible across the AONBs, outside of existing networks where people may already be tuned in to the existence of the fund. The same may be said nationally, with feedback from key partners indicating a relatively low profile of the fund.

Although not extensive, it's clear that there are positive examples of promotion, which include examples of projects and some case studies on some of the AONB websites and / or social media, a dedicated section to funded projects in the annual Llygad Llŷn Newsletter (as already noted) and reporting of projects as part of internal reporting mechanisms within Local Authorities.

There are examples of projects having carried out their own publicity, and use of the logo is certainly noted where printed material is produced. Examples of recognition of the fund by project recipients include:

- [Nitten Field project](#)
- [Rivers of Gower, West Wales Rivers Trust](#)
- [Pine Marten Project, Gwent Wildlife Trust](#)

2.4 Key Points and Observations

Welsh Government Funding Cycle: A move away from annual funding to a three-year offer was noted as being highly appreciated and beneficial in more effective delivery of projects. This was noted by AONB Teams and grant recipients, and also evidenced in delivery of projects, allowing for increased planning, engagement and long-term delivery. Good levels of communication between Welsh Government and the AONB Teams also increases confidence in future funding, which in turn allows for better planning and communication to prospective grant applicants.

Staff Support: The positive role that AONB Teams play in supporting applicants is exceptional and highly regarded by all projects visited as part of the evaluation. It is a prominent and particularly strong element of this funding framework and has provided access to funding for groups which may not have had the capacity or confidence to apply to funding bodies not embedded in the local community. Noting concerns expressed by AONB Teams on security of wider revenue funding, any efforts that can be made to address resourcing concerns would provide additional opportunities for collaboration and partnership working with SDF funded projects.

Grant promotion: Awareness of SDF as a potential funding opportunity is largely limited to word of mouth / known networks in some areas. There would be merit in further promotion of the grant, particularly where there is more limited uptake by new / community led applicants.

Accessing Grant Information: Grant application forms are largely accessed by direct contact with the AONB Teams. Whilst there is no evidence that lack of direct access to the grant information is seen as a barrier, providing online access to grant criteria and eligibility does provide the opportunity for increased accessibility to, and promotion of, the grant.

Grant Documents: There are a good range of documents that are in place to support the process, however there is a need to refresh some of these documents to reflect changes and updates that have been made over the years, including recent updates to the Welsh Government guidance document. This would best be done as a collaborative approach between AONB Teams, NAAONB and Welsh Government, drawing on the knowledge and individual examples that already exists. The following were noted as likely to benefit from an update:

- A refresh of the grant criteria / purposes, as set out in the offer letter and guidance, seeking alignment and potential simplification
- Criteria / scoring systems, that can be provided to project applicants
- A reporting template or structure for project applicants.

In addition, consideration could be given to offering a simplified application form for smaller projects.

Assessment Panels – Composition and Governance: Collaboratively agree an approach to ensure consistency and effective governance by all panels. This could include:

- A training or engagement programme which provides an overview of the purposes of the SDF, reinforces the role of the panel members and also provides an opportunity to keep panel members abreast of emerging priorities. In order to maintain a suitable level of authority and independence, whilst encouraging sharing of knowledge across the AONBs, this would ideally be carried out by a party not currently affiliated with the panel, such as NAAONB.
- An increased / occasional presence by Welsh Government to observe panel proceedings, provide feedback on national priorities and further provide opportunity to share knowledge on activities from other areas. Such an approach was undertaken on LEADER funding panels and helped to increase engagement between Welsh Government and local delivery partners.
- Consideration of additional mechanisms or reporting requirements that may be helpful in ensuring that Welsh Government guidance supports and enables effective governance proceedings and appropriate representation of sectors and interest groups.

Decision Making: There are some elements of decision making that would benefit from increased transparency in some areas. These include:

- Ensuring there is clarity to applicants on scoring methodologies (as noted under grant documents) and how their projects have been scored / assessed.
- Reporting on projects that have been held back / offered funding at a lower level than applied for, due to funds already being allocated. This would also be helpful in demonstrating demand of the fund, which could be utilised in advocating for ongoing / increased funding from Welsh Government.

Annual Reports: Currently, it is difficult to fully appreciate the impact of the fund and the projects which have been supported. A systematic approach to the annual reports would ensure that the impact of the fund is more apparent, with greater ease in extracting key figures and outcomes. This should include the formatting / detail on individual projects and importantly, a summary of the impact of the fund for each area, providing further detail on key Welsh Government priorities. Where there are strong / emerging priorities by Welsh Government, consideration could be given to providing an additional focus on these areas, in order to demonstrate the value of the fund more widely. Again, this is something that should be developed and agreed collaboratively, drawing on examples that currently exist within the AONB network.

Alongside this, some further clarity, or sharing, of reports which may have been produced as part of feasibility studies or piloting of products, would be beneficial.

Promotion of Successful Projects: There would be merit in undertaking a collaborative approach to celebrating the success of the scheme and attempting to increase its profile; locally and nationally. The economic climate we are facing will undoubtedly put pressure on public budgets and greater recognition and promotion of the fund will be important in maintaining, or even increasing, support for the fund.

More targeted reporting, as highlighted for the annual reports, will make a valuable contribution here, however additional promotional activity would be beneficial. Whilst recognising existing pressures on staff, where it is possible, consideration could be given to activities such as:

- Greater use and sharing of promotional videos (with some excellent examples referenced later within this report)
- Creation and sharing of case studies
- Increased prominence on individual AONB and / or NAAONB Websites
- A celebratory event, where select projects are given the opportunity to share their story more widely.

3 Projects delivered by the SDF

3.1 Evaluation approach

In order to evaluate the impact of the scheme more thoroughly, an evaluation has been made of each AONB area in turn, through review of the SDF reports provided to Welsh Government during the evaluation period and through site visits / meetings with a selection of projects from each area. Evaluation of each project against all criteria isn't possible, due to the project detail that is available, however a more detailed evaluation is possible for the visited projects, with further detail provided where relevant.

Evaluation criteria has been grouped into broader categories (see table below), seeking to address the range of criteria set out within the guidance and purposes, as set out within the offer letters made by Welsh Government. N.B. these are broad categories and there may be some overlap.

These are:

Evaluation Categories	Grant guidance and conditions
Sustainability, climate change and biodiversity (demonstrating innovation and best practice)	To explore innovative ways of contributing to the opportunities and challenges set out in the Welsh Government's current agenda for the environment and sustainability. Consider Well-being Goal: Resilient Wales; Natural Resources Policy: ecosystem resilience, climate change and biodiversity decline, nature-based solutions, renewable energy; Biodiversity Deep Dive.
Sustainable and healthy communities	To build capacity in local communities, and to develop and support community-based projects promoting sustainable development objectives. Consider Well-being Goals: Healthier and More Equal Wales, Wales of Cohesive Communities, Culture and Language; Natural Resources Policy: healthy, active and connected communities; Valued and Resilient: valued places, a more diverse cross section of society engaged and involved.

Awareness raising and positive behaviour change for sustainability	To generate greater awareness and understanding of sustainability amongst residents and visitors, and facilitate positive behaviour change. Also consider Well-being Goal: a Globally Responsible Wales
Purposes of the AONB and the AONB Management Plan objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape - Promote sustainable forms of economic and social development of local communities (consider Well-being Goal: Prosperous Wales; Natural Resources Policy: green growth and innovation to create sustainable jobs, a resource efficient economy; NRP challenge: UK's withdrawal from the EU) - Meet recreational demands, so long as it is consistent with the conservation of the area, and with the needs of agriculture, forestry and other land uses - Objectives of each management plan
Sustainable Development Principles and partnership working	Considered throughout. Consider Long term, prevention, integration, collaboration, involvement.

It should be stressed that it would be difficult for individual projects to deliver against all criteria. It is reasonable to expect that projects would focus on certain elements, provided that the key elements of the grant criteria are met. As a whole however, it is reasonable to place greater expectation on individual AONBs to deliver more comprehensively against the grant criteria, whilst recognising that there will be local priorities that demonstrate and influence strengths in certain areas.

3.2 Delivery of Projects within each AONB

3.2.1 Clwydian Range and Dee Valley AONB

Overview

The reports present the range and diversity of projects well, with the front photos demonstrating a range of culture and people, habitat, landscape, access and well-being and community and economy. Overall, there is a strong theme of delivery against local food and produce, historical and archaeological conservation and promotion, and landscape and biodiversity. The projects demonstrate the broad scope of the fund which can deliver against a range of policy priorities.

The reports benefit from an introductory section which highlights key targets and delivery against Well-being goals (for years 18/19 and 19/20). These sections help to present the overall impact of the scheme, in addition to the detail provided for each project. As an example, 2018/19 included delivery of the following outputs:

- 11 jobs created
- 8 projects provided volunteering opportunities
- 6 projects provided training / awareness raising on sustainability
- 2000+ volunteer hours
- 19,000 people engaged with as part of the projects
- 2 projects that built capacity in the community
- 1 each of historic feature conserved, feasibility study, pilot study

In 2019/20, the additional output was provided of:

- 78 events promoting sustainable development principles
- 101 promotional events

Individual project descriptions also benefitted from a clear table which provided outputs and outcomes of that project with clear referencing to management plan objectives.

Project values averaged c. £2.8K, with an average of 21 projects supported each year. There was good use of funds to draw down match funding.

Sustainability, climate change and biodiversity

There are a good range of projects which deliver against environmental and sustainability agendas, demonstrating a good level of delivery against this category.

Biodiversity and ecosystem resilience is well represented in grant delivery each year.

Examples include:

- The Robocut project, which funded 3 demonstration days of 'Roboflail', a lightweight machine that can be remotely controlled. The target areas were heath which were difficult to access and manage through grazing, resulting in scrub encroachment. The project has resulted in better managed sites, reinstatement of grazing in areas, better working relationships with the graziers and increased habitat

for Black Grouse, a priority species for the area. Anecdotal reports by AONB Team indicate an increase in numbers of Grouse for the area. Although not possible to attribute solely to this project, it has the potential to be a contributory factor.

- The Graigfechan Eco-connectivity project supported community groups in management of local Wildlife Trust Reserves, one of which is a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Activities supported otter conservation through creation of a holt, habitat restoration through the removal of invasives and increased pollinator provision through native daffodil planting. Additional benefits from the scheme include negotiated extension to the reserve boundary, providing enhanced protection for biodiversity in the long-term.
- Creation and further improvement to Tafarn y Gelyn Pond provides a good example of a biodiversity initiative being led by local residents, who identified the opportunity to create this biodiversity feature as a community asset.
- As part of the SDF scheme, CRDV run a dedicated countryside grant scheme, which, although a small fund, has clearly boosted creation and enhancement to boundary features, providing consistent delivery of hedgerow and stone wall restoration and creation schemes.

Although not as strongly represented, examples are also seen of projects to address climate change, either directly or indirectly:

- Ynni Lleol in 2018/19 demonstrates an innovative approach of generating stronger links between energy consumption and local renewable energy generation through creation of a local energy club. Although external factors ultimately resulted in the 'switch' being unable to progress, it remains important to be able to trial schemes such as this
- There has been consistent and positive delivery for promotion and support of local food and produce, which will in turn encourage local shopping with the additional benefit of reduced travel

The Sudd Afal Project provides an example of waste reduction, utilising apples to create a local produce, which would otherwise have gone to waste, whilst also signing up to the Ruthin Plastic Free pledge. The Active Woods Wales and Nature for Health projects demonstrate use of the natural environment as a nature-based solution to health and well-being and combatting loneliness and isolation, whilst access to nature was provided by the access improvements at Tafarn y Gelyn Pond.

[Sustainable and healthy communities](#)

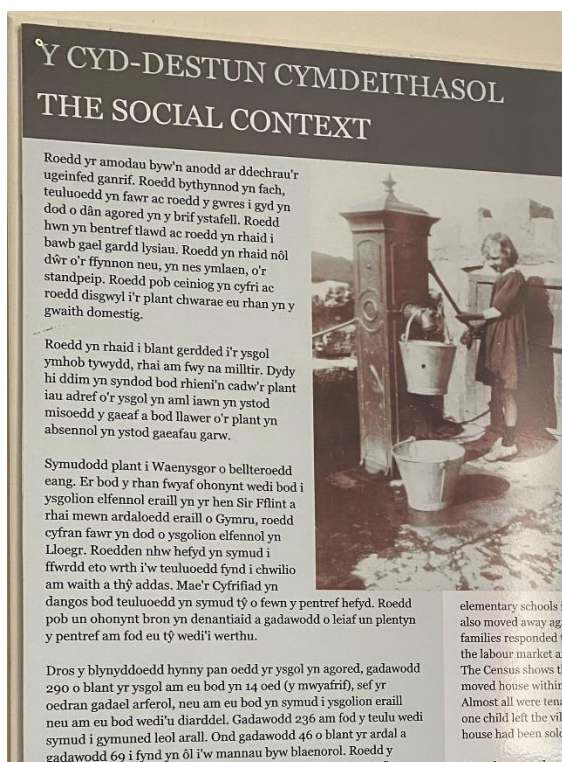
Projects are generally either developed and delivered by the community or demonstrate engagement with, and benefit to, the community. Of the projects chosen for visits, the majority were able to demonstrate how projects had been identified through local need, with involvement of community members and local businesses maintained through delivery.

There are examples of projects which demonstrate an exceptionally strong community focus, building a sense of community cohesion, such as [Cilcain Community Shop](#). Following

To deliver and promote the **purposes of the AONB** and the objectives as set out in the AONB Management Plan

The biodiversity, landscape and archaeological projects already highlighted all make a valuable contribution to the AONB's primary purpose, to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape. The Countryside Grant Scheme provides a welcome focus on boundary features which will positively influence the landscape and individual activities, whilst biodiversity projects will directly support identified characteristics of the AONB, such as heather moorland and broadleaved woodlands.

There are good examples here of conservation of archaeological and historical features in the landscape, as well as natural heritage. The Discovering Old Welsh Houses, as an example, carried out research, training, delivered talks and events across NE Wales, and shared information on their website. Gwaenysgor Conservation Group utilised the funding for restoration of a well. It is a valued and important feature locally, reflected in interpretation within the village hall, and now also being promoted as a feature to local walkers. The group have gone on to secure funding for additional projects, such as a community garden with wildflower meadow at the centre of the village.



[Gwlangollen](#) provides an example of bringing producers and crafters together to explore the potential to create a marketable product from local wool fleece (see image below). Product use has been supported through collaboration and engagement with other local projects, including by the AONB Team, who are trialling it as a ground layer on footpaths and gateways with heavy traffic.



Tourism and economic development are particularly well represented and support by SDF has played a valuable role in building the capacity and scope of Clwydian Range Tourism Group, providing a strong focus on developing and promoting food and hospitality. The Stay Eat Do Project, which develops collaboration between food producers, hospitality trade and consumers, supported 66 small and local business in one year alone.

Project visits highlighted a high level of awareness of the AONB and existence of a Management Plan, with promotion of the AONB seen to be integrated into project delivery.

3.2.2 Anglesey AONB

Overview

Anglesey SDF Projects deliver well against biodiversity and engagement with the natural environment, demonstrating good links with organisations which deliver for nature conservation and / or well-being and nature-based activities.

The projects here have delivered high levels of engagement, however involvement by the community in development and delivery of projects is more limited, with a greater focus on delivery by organisations, rather than by local, community groups. In order to increase accessibility of this fund to the wider community, some further outreach / promotion of the SDF would be beneficial to increase involvement by the community in delivery.

Outputs and outcomes are clearly presented for each project. Outputs are well represented, presenting a range of different themes. Direct link to well-being goals and Environment (Wales) Act are recognised, although not detailed. The requirement to deliver against the Management Plan is set out in the report, with key themes set out in the introduction of the report, although not detailed. An introductory section on the key outputs, outcomes and delivery against Welsh Government priorities (as provided by the AONB Team as an example alternative format and depicted in Sect. 2.3) would help demonstrate the overall impact of all the projects.

Project values averaged c. £11K, with an average of 6 projects supported each year. Whilst there were a notably smaller number of projects that benefitted from funding, it should be stressed that the positive impacts of these projects were often quite extensive, with a wide reach and high levels of engagement.

The AONB Community Warden makes a significant and positive contribution to the impact of the SDF at Anglesey. Although it was clear that appropriate agreement had been reached in establishing the post and utilising the SDF as a funding mechanism, it was unclear what ongoing process was in place to demonstrate authorisation. Some clarity / refresh of existing arrangements to ensure transparency would be beneficial.

Sustainability, climate change and biodiversity

Biodiversity is very well represented within the projects, with the Afon Wygyr Water Quality and Habitat Improvement Project providing an excellent example of evidence-based action to tackle a problem at source, resulting in wide-ranging benefits to the community as well as biodiversity.

The Afon Wygyr Project was developed in response to findings from the survey carried out by North Wales Rivers Trust (then Clwyd, Conwy and Gwynedd Rivers Trust) in 2017, along the 10 largest rivers on Anglesey. The survey identified that the Afon Wygyr was affected by cattle using the river for drinking, leading to large quantities of silt and organic matter entering the river and erosion of bankside and instream habitat for fish and other wildlife. Further work by NRW identified that this was contributing to the poor quality of the bathing water at Cemaes during 2017. Other factors impacting on habitat and water quality were 18 man-made weirs, impacting on fish movement and spawning conditions, and overgrown bankside vegetation causing blockages and shading.

Afon Wygyr Water Quality and Habitat Improvement Project – Focus on Outcomes for Nature

The Afon Wygyr Project has delivered well across most of the grant categories and policy requirements, providing direct benefits for local communities and the economy, whilst also acting as a catalyst for a follow-on project to create a circular walk, and in building capacity of the Trust. In particular, however, it delivers strongly for biodiversity and nature-based outcomes, further detail of which is set out below.

Through effective engagement with local landowners, local groups and with support from AONB volunteers, the project succeeded in notching 18 weirs (see images below, showing 'before' and 'after' notching) to enable fish migration; carried out management of bankside vegetation; and excluded cattle from the Lower Wygyr by fencing and providing alternative drinking water in troughs fed from a new borehole. This is detailed further on the [North Wales Rivers Trust website](#).



Responding directly to grant criteria:

The project demonstrates application of the **sustainable development principles**, by providing a **long-term** solution for access to water, through **involvement** of the local landowner, thereby **preventing** introduction of bacteria, nutrients and silt into the watercourse. This was done in **collaboration** with local partners, providing an opportunity to share resources, increase understanding of how project outcomes provide **integration** across broader outcomes and well-being goals, such as a healthier and more prosperous Wales.

The project contributes towards a **Resilient Environment and the Resilient Wales Well-being Goal**, by enhancement of wildlife habitats, particularly for sea trout and brown trout by removing obstructions to fish movement, improved river gravels and diversification of stream habitats.

Project delivery also responds well to the **Natural Resources Policy**, providing an effective demonstration of taking a **place-based approach** to resolving water quality issue at Cemaes Bay, having developed an appropriate understanding of its cause, and working with local stakeholders to put **nature-based solutions** in place. The water quality at Cemaes Bay was reported as having improved from poor to sufficient in the 2018/19 annual report and review of the NRW data on bathing water demonstrates ongoing improvements, culminating in an 'excellent' rating for 2021 and 'good' for 2020.

Locally, the project makes an important contribution to management plan objectives that support the theme of **Maintaining Nature and the Environment**, through sensitive management of the river habitat to meet water quality standards; **Maintaining the Living and Working Landscape** through provision of a solution which support sustainable land use; and **Supporting Opportunities for Visiting and Enjoying the Landscape** by the restoration of bathing water, playing a vital role in supporting tourism and recreation.

Wild Volunteering Ynys Môn provides opportunities for young people to develop skills and engage with the natural environment. It has focused on key species: Yellowhammer, Swift, Harvest Mouse and Sandwich Tern, providing awareness raising sessions and workshops with schools, also producing a good level of media attention, further increasing its reach. Detail was provided of individual activities carried out for each species, including feeding, provision of nest boxes, surveys, training and habitat work.

The Menai Rivers: Biodiversity Project (for water vole) and Healthy Reds, by the Red Squirrel Trust, provide further examples of priority species focused action, delivering monitoring, survey and research activities, volunteer engagement, promotion through social media and Radio Cymru, and direct action against grey squirrel / mink. Both water vole and red squirrel are under threat, and Anglesey's red squirrel population is of national significance, highlighting the value of supporting targeted species activities such as these.

Focused delivery against climate change is not evident, although strong elements of awareness raising and engagement on general environmental and sustainability issues will make a contribution towards positive behaviour change, likely to include positive action for climate change and carbon reduction.

[Sustainable and healthy communities](#)

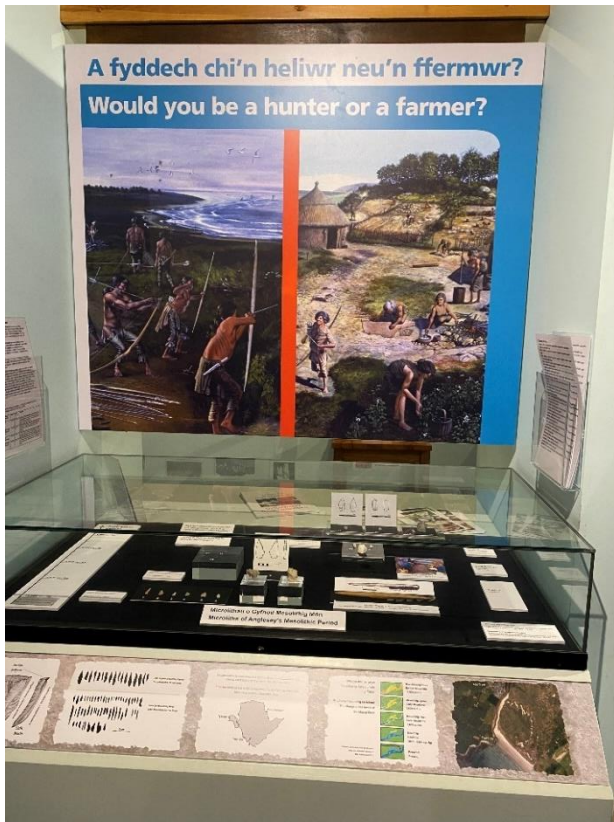
There are good examples of projects which encourage more active lifestyles in the natural environment. [Babi Actif](#) is a local community initiative promoting health, well-being and inspiration for people to better engage with their local environment. It aims to create a culture of active families by supporting parents and children to get active during a baby's first 1000 days. The [Babi Actif Promotional Video](#) provides an excellent insight into the project, providing further detail and feedback from participants.

Geo Kayaking by B-active has opened up opportunities for secondary school pupils to access the coastal environment, increasing understanding of the geological features whilst also taking part in physical activity. The project helps raise awareness of the AONB, as the geological and coastal features are very much part of the AONB (and a UNESCO Geopark). Engagement with the schools also increases confidence and builds their capacity to take children outdoors.

Use of Welsh language is prominent on the island and efforts have been made to promote the language and ensure Welsh language / bilingual provision. Support of the [TeliMôn](#) Project has provided a unique avenue to share content and raise awareness of matters directly relevant to Anglesey residents. It is a bilingual on-line TV channel which focuses on the 'sense of place' agenda, adding value to natural and cultural resources. Programmes raise awareness of the AONB and countryside matters, alongside local content.

Culture is well represented by the Mesolithic Anglesey Project, which has provided opportunities for participants to engage in archaeological activities undertaken as part of PhD research, increasing understanding and raising awareness of the prehistoric era. The project has resulted in a collaboration between the project applicant and Oriel Môn, with

findings from the activities used to create a display (see images below), which will provide a valuable legacy to the project.



To generate **greater awareness and understanding** of sustainability amongst residents and visitors, and facilitate **positive behaviour change**

The AONB Community Warden delivers high levels of engagement, with large number of events and promotional activities. The project has demonstrated excellent links with schools, engaged with 32 (out of 46) in 2020/21, diversified through covid, with educational presentations available for local schools to access on Google Classroom. Delivery has included a strong element of awareness raising, providing opportunities for increased understanding of conservation issues and facilitating further action and positive change. Activities have supported conservation activities, included a focus on littering and dog-fouling, and the [Rediscover Anglesey Safely](#) programme whilst emerging from covid restrictions.

Wild Volunteering Ynys Môn, by North Wales Wildlife Trust, similarly has a strong focus on engagement. The project has supported development of skills to deliver species conservation action, with volunteers keen to remain involved with species monitoring and action. Reporting has demonstrated positive outcomes for some of the participants, including a keen young ornithologist being mentored in voluntary wardening.

Sŵn y Môr, a newsletter celebrating the coast, countryside and AONB was produced in 2020, providing information for visitors and local residents. Wider engagement and awareness raising is facilitated through the [AHNE Ynys Môn AONB](#) Facebook page. Set up more recently, it demonstrates the range of activities and promotion that is carried out.

To deliver and promote the **purposes of the AONB** and the objectives as set out in the AONB Management Plan

Working within the AONB Team, the Community Warden is well placed to support and promote wider initiatives and activities being delivered as part of Management Plan implementation. It's clear the post is embedded well into the team and there is additional value that is provided by other members of the team in implementation of SDF funded activities.

The post has invariably increased capacity within the team, to deliver a far greater level of outreach work than would be possible otherwise. This includes collaboration with other partners, volunteer support and direct action on the ground, promotion and engagement.

Delivery has aligned well with the purposes of the AONB. It has supported and promoted recreational use and access to the AONB, whilst also working with the tourism team to promote, raise awareness and understanding of the AONB.

Projects provide examples of contributions towards green growth, with a good focus on training and skills development within a number of biodiversity projects. Tech Tyfu, a vertical farming, pilot project, delivered by Menter Môn, is pioneering the use of vertical farming in the island's education system, and is working closely with schools and higher education institutions on Anglesey,

Support of Halen Môn; Growing the Brand through Diversification, provides a good example of the potential to raise the profile of the AONB, supporting investment in a food truck which will likely have increased tourism provision on the site. Whilst active promotion of the AONB / SDF funding is unknown, Halen Môn branding is strongly associated with the Island of Anglesey, with high profile and global reach.

3.2.3 Llŷn AONB

Overview

Llŷn AONB demonstrates high level of support for community led initiatives and there is strong delivery of projects which deliver against cultural, built and historical elements, highly representative of local priorities.

Delivery against biodiversity and natural heritage is limited, with a couple of examples providing a welcome contribution to this element. Efforts to increase delivery against these elements, in particular, would be beneficial here. Recognising low numbers of applications on this theme, this could possibly be supported by increased partnership working and engagement with organisations and networks delivering on these elements.

An average of 17 projects are supported each year. The average value is c. £3.5K although in reality, the vast majority were much smaller, with a few larger projects.

Within the annual report, greater level of detail on outputs and outcomes for individual projects would allow for greater understanding of the impact of the projects. Discussion with project applicants during project visits identified good levels of delivery with positive outcomes, but this wasn't always reflected in the reports. From 19/20, additional detail and images have been included; links to the relevant MP policies are provided, although not detailed. An introductory section on the key outputs, outcomes and delivery against Welsh Government priorities would help demonstrate the overall impact of all the projects.

Sustainability, climate change and biodiversity.

Llŷn Coast Bus makes a good contribution towards carbon reduction through reduction in individual travel and use of an electric vehicle. Additional benefits reported include a reduction in traffic congestion and problem parking, and helping to reduce pollution from congestion and waiting traffic. Support of the Charge Points Study was a further welcome addition to this agenda, which included research into installation of new charging points.

Projects which focus on biodiversity or the natural landscape are limited and this is acknowledged by the AONB Team, reporting on less applications being received on this theme. There are some examples, such as creation of a wildflower meadow at Morfa Nefyn and a project by RSPB on Chough conservation. RSPB's Chough Project provided a welcome addition, carrying out a habitat condition assessment for Chough, identifying the actions needed to provide suitable habitat for the bird. A follow up project was proposed, which would have delivered on these actions, but was turned down by the panel. Whilst noting that detail of the application hasn't been reviewed as part of this evaluation, this would potentially have made a good contribution to the overall impact of the fund.

There is recognition of biodiversity within some of the built environment projects, with some references to hedging or goods to create new habitat. Some further examples of clearance work, or daffodil planting, may possibly make a greater contribution to amenity or visual landscape, than biodiversity enhancement, however it may be a case that further detail within the annual reports would help to evidence a greater contribution to biodiversity.

A more targeted approach to delivering against Welsh Government's climate and nature agenda would provide a more robust delivery against this policy area.

Sustainable and healthy communities

Built, cultural and historic environment is clearly important in the Llŷn AONB and there is a good contribution towards these areas, making a strong contribution to the Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language Well-being Goal. Projects are very strong on Welsh language and culture and reflective of the importance that is placed on this locally.

These also make a positive contribution to the AONB landscape, particularly examples such as the cemetery wall at Clynnon Fawr Church, which is an iconic site within the AONB and associated with a centuries old pilgrim's trail. A project visit to Capel Ceidio highlighted the benefits that projects such as these deliver to small pockets of the community, with this example addressing a parking issue on a narrow, rural road, resulting in improved accessibility to the chapel, better use of the building and increased congregation numbers.

Knowledge and awareness raising on culture and history is very well represented, with examples of historical and cultural talks and festivals. Further discussion with project lead on the RS Thomas Festival, which has now developed into a weekend of events, demonstrated a broad range of additional benefits, including support for local businesses, promotion of the AONB, natural environment and the link between culture and landscape. Their [promotional video](#) provides an engaging introduction to the festival whilst a recital of Sarn Rhiw alongside imagery of the landscape can be found [here](#).

The Llŷn Coast Bus provides a valuable service for the local community, as well as providing a resource for walkers and tourists to access the coast path. The service is also appreciated by the care sector, is used by Nefyn's Aging Well group and social and support groups from Ederm and Abersoch.

A high proportion of projects are led by community members, and therefore deliver particularly well against this category. There are a number of projects which tackle social isolation and support community cohesion. The Tafarn yr Heliwr Project, spanning a number of years, was to support the purchase and development of a community owned pub, providing funding to raise awareness of the venture, carry out surveys of the building and physical improvements to the building.

The project as a whole is an exceptional example of a community focused initiative, contributing well across the well-being goals and providing good examples of sustainable development principles. Of note, support by SDF has acted as a strong enabler, providing funding for elements that did not fit so well within other grant criteria, facilitating additional grant funding and much broader outcomes not captured withing reporting mechanisms.

An overview of these wider benefits is provided on the next page.

Tafarn yr Heliwr: Broader Outcomes

The pub has been developed as a community space, with efforts made to engage and support more vulnerable members of the community. At the time of the project visit, a 'Cinio Cynnes' Session (Hot Lunch) had just been delivered, providing an affordable meal and social activity for local residents, with proceeds being donated to a local charity. The venue provides a safe and welcoming space for more isolated individuals, as well as serving the local community, whilst also functioning as a visitor destination, providing accommodation and food for visitors.



The venue provides an opportunity to showcase local art (see below), and to support local producers and suppliers as much as possible. The pub follows a strong ethos of promotion of Welsh culture, with Welsh music playing in the background and images of the AONB and local areas displayed throughout the building.



In addition to the building itself, the community group driving this forward are clearly invested in the local community, supporting businesses and providing local employment. The renovation works have improved the physical appearance of the high street, with the group reporting on visual improvements being undertaken by nearby businesses as a result. They have created a striking mural nearby, providing a focal point to the village; in addition, they are running a community allotment, which can be accessed by local residents as well as being used to provide fresh, local produce as part of the pub's menu.



To generate **greater awareness and understanding** of sustainability amongst residents and visitors, and facilitate **positive behaviour change**

Whilst promotion of cultural and historical heritage is a more prominent theme, there is also some evidence of awareness raising of the natural environment.

The Maritime Museum is making a contribution towards behaviour change, with funding provided for staff to deliver summer activities, including for children, families and local history talks. The project reported positive feedback from participants; *"Fantastic sessions. 90 minutes filled with fun activities, mixed with learning in a lively, entertaining environment."*

The Glanhau Traeth Porth Neigwl Project by Llanengan Litter Pickers, provides a good demonstration of how a small contribution can support long term delivery. Funding was provided for litter picking equipment in 2018/19, with the group appearing to still be active on the [Llanengan Litter Pickers Facebook Page](#).

The Taith Tridiau Llyn Project (Llyn three day tour) provided the opportunity for people to explore and enjoy different parts of the Llŷn landscape over the three day period, with 100 people taking part. Funding also supported development of volunteering opportunities to support the walks and training in first aid / walk leader skills.

To deliver and promote the **purposes of the AONB** and the objectives as set out in the AONB Management Plan

In terms of the landscape, there is a strong focus on the built and historical environment, with some smaller projects contributing towards local enhancement of the natural landscape.

Economic activity is supported by the Llŷn Coast Bus, reporting on the role it plays in providing access to local shops, rather than residents having to rely on existing bus services which tend to only service links to the larger towns. The Pwllheli Food Festival was successfully delivered in 2020, supporting local businesses and drawing in Welsh performers such as Bryn Fôn a'r Band. Although this hasn't yet transpired into a regular event, Facebook activity demonstrates the success of the festival and an ambition to relaunch in the coming years.

Recreational activity is strongly supported by the Llŷn Coast Bus, providing a valuable resource to promote walking and tourism. It is clearly an asset to the residents and tourism provision on the peninsula and local financial support has been valuable in helping to develop and establish this service. The financial sustainability of the scheme is being explored, with discussions having been held with Transport for Wales.

Tafarn yr Heliwr, as already outlined, provides an example of a project which delivers against multiple outcomes, strongly supporting local businesses and the community, promoting Welsh language, culture, with features of the AONB landscape displayed as art within the accommodation.

3.2.4 Gower AONB

Overview

Gower AONB has seen a good range of projects with strong delivery against biodiversity, landscape and access / engagement with the natural environment. There are good examples of partnership led projects, such as the Gower Hedgerow Hub, YMCA (which has good partnership links itself) and also projects coming from the community.

Healthy eating and access to locally grown food is well represented, with project delivery demonstrating excellent support and knowledge sharing between local CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture).

An average of 16 projects are supported each year, with an average funding value of c. £4K. Some projects require very little financial input, with one receiving funding of only £150 and quite a few of only a few hundred pounds.

Outputs and outcomes for individual projects are clearly presented and some summary performance indicators for all projects are specified, although these do not reflect current Welsh Government priorities, such as Well-being Goals or delivery against the Natural Resource Policy.

Publicity of the fund is detailed, highlighting that 'word of mouth with some quiet promotion' was proving successful for this area. The number of new projects is highlighted, which are generally a high proportion of the total projects funded.

Sustainability, climate change and biodiversity.

There is a good level of delivery seen against biodiversity and landscape. Examples of projects include:

- Purchase of equipment by Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales (WTSWW), reported as contributing towards restoration of 60ha of coastal limestone grassland to favourable conservation status. With a contribution of £1K towards a project cost of £35K, this demonstrates excellent value for money.
- Gower Hedgerow Hub. The project specifically aims to conserve and enhance Gower's field boundaries, which are a direct link to past cultural heritage and the farming community. As a priority habitat, with associated protected species, the project sought to improve management of hedgerows in the landscape, supporting delivery of the AONB Management Plan and Local Biodiversity Action Plan.
- Support of the Gower Badger Vaccination programme, providing benefits to the farming community as well as badgers.
- Rivers of Gower, by West Wales Rivers Trust, provides a good demonstration of long-term planning, leading with survey, engagement through to action on the ground. This also highlights the benefit of being able to commit to multi-year delivery.

- Nitten Field project. Funding provided a contributing towards a long-term initiative to provide a food source for birds, invertebrates, etc. The field is now being allowed to self-seed, with appropriate management, and remains a valuable resource. This image (from the website) demonstrates the impact of such initiatives on the landscape (within an otherwise intensively farmed landscape).



Targeted delivery against decarbonisation or climate change is more limited, although it is recognised that sustainable management of land does make a contribution towards this issue.

[Sustainable and healthy communities](#)

There are a good number of access / walking related projects, including YMCA's Transport for Gower project, which has included a focus on young people from urban areas, bringing in people from outside the AONB. The Taste of Gower project, which delivers a monthly walking group, provides an opportunity to walk different parts of Gower and has developed into a social activity for its members. Participation is reported to be varied, including people attending through probation services, or people reporting to suffer from anxiety, with the group attempting to promote inclusivity and to provide a welcoming environment.

[Cae Tân CSA](#) is a grower led, community supported agriculture scheme, developed in 2013 and now financially sustainable and running a range of projects to increase engagement and share knowledge with other existing or prospective CSAs. CSAs create a partnership between growers and consumers, creating a short supply chain with increased financial stability for growers and a closer connection with their community, whilst consumers have better access to fresh, locally grown healthy food (see image overleaf).



The [CSA promotional video](#) provides an excellent overview of the initiative, demonstrating the high levels of involvement from local volunteers, and outreach programmes, such as the pizza project with schools, where they grew wheat, onions, tomatoes and herbs with the pupils. The pupils were involved throughout the process, including grinding of the wheat to make flour and making their own pizzas on site.

There are positive examples of volunteering opportunities and engagement in delivery, including support of Coeden Fach Community Tree Nursery's volunteer hub, training opportunities as part of Gower Hedgerow Hub and the Church in Wales' Gower Youth Project, which delivered a range of environmental, social and sporting activities.

Projects which promote and support culture and Welsh language are not as prominent here, although there is some promotion of historical heritage a part of walking activities and the Gower Folk Festival.

To generate **greater awareness and understanding** of sustainability amongst residents and visitors, and facilitate **positive behaviour change**

There are good levels of engagement, awareness raising and training in conservation of landscape and natural environment, also on benefits of organic, locally grown food and shortened supply chains.

Cae Tân CSA, again, provides good engagement with their customers and provides an opportunity to become more involved and learn about growing. The SDF directly funded the Training the Growers and Developing the Trainers Projects, which provided training for people wanting to set up and run CSAs, and individual training for growers (including individuals for gardens and allotments). Developing the Training led to development of a national online training course, part of formal accredited training provided to support CSA development for the first time. Locally, they have supported creation of a new CSA (Big Meadow CSA), through the Training the Growers initiative.

Gower Hedgerow Hub is a good demonstration of awareness raising to encourage positive action for Gower hedgerows, with landowners encouraged to carry out further work beyond the funding directly provided by the project. The project included training on hedgelaying, with local contractors better able to lay hedges, increasing availability of hedgelaying as a local service. Similarly, the Rivers of Gower Project, demonstrates an active approach to engagement and promotion of the project, highlighted on the [West Wales Rivers Trust website](#).

To deliver and promote the [purposes of the AONB](#) and the objectives as set out in the [AONB Management Plan](#)

There are good levels of delivery for the natural landscape at Gower, with evidence of hedgerow and boundary features enhancement, management of coastal habitats and support of grazing activity on the common, a prominent landscape feature here.

Built heritage is also supported, such as restoration of the Mewslade Wall. This has led to a long-term project with the Gower Society and National Trust, undertaking similar projects over the following 5 years. The Image below (from the SDF report) demonstrates the positive impact on the landscape from some schemes.



Innovation and piloting of sustainable products are evidenced. The Gower Flax Project is researching and trialling local regenerative fibre systems, attempting to create a model for growing fibre flax at scale (see image on the right).

A similar approach is being taken with the Biotextile Feasibility Study, which is examining ways in which Wales-sourced materials from the management and conservation practices within Special Areas of Conservation (SAC's), common land, agriculture and horticulture can be utilised for the benefit of biodiversity, sustainability and carbon sequestration. Initiatives such as these provide the potential for exciting and truly innovative schemes to develop new sustainable products as part of green growth for Wales.



Recreational activity is supported:

- The Reynoldston Ramblers Walks book promotes 24 walks around Gower, also demonstrating economic sustainability with the aim to be self-sufficient from sale of the book.
- Taste of Gower is now self-sufficient in delivery of monthly activities and a steadily increasing membership.
- Gower Sea Rowing. A small contribution made a significant input to the club, allowing them to maintain activities through poor weather and raise their profile at events. Support has helped them to increase membership, build their capacity and go on to apply for other funding, with ambitions to increase engagement through development of youth activities.
- Port Eynon Project demonstrates a project that would seek to address recreational pressure, by carrying out a feasibility study to inform potential capital works for a detailed scheme of improvements to visitor facilities.

3.2.5 Wye Valley AONB

Overview

Awareness raising and engagement on sustainability issues, the natural environment and culture are very well represented, with a clear focus on encouraging and facilitating behaviour change, demonstrating effective contribution towards the Globally Responsible Wales well-being goal. The Wye River Festival is a prominent feature of this, but is not the only example. The link between art and environment is a strong theme here, demonstrating innovative approaches to engaging people through both forms.

A good proportion of projects have originated through the Partnership or Monmouthshire County council, and can be projects of significant value. The number of independent applications is supplemented by the Landscape and Biodiversity Enhancement Grant, without which, the, the number of projects originating directly from the community would be more limited.

On average, 10 projects are funded each year. Grant contributions are an average of c. £6K per project, ranging from £35K for one project, to £688 for the Tintern Old Station Family Pack.

Within the annual report, outputs and outcomes aren't systematically included for individual projects, however an increased level of detail was provided in 2010/21, appearing to reflect detail collected within the individual project reports.

In terms of overall impact, a small number of KPIs and outputs were provided as part of the introduction, similar in nature to those provided by Gower AONB, possibly indicating alignment with a previous guidance document. Despite the additional detail provided, the overall impact remained more difficult to gauge, which could be addressed by the addition of a summary / overview as part of the introduction. Furthermore, there is no, or limited, reference to delivery against more recent priorities such as well-being goals or the Natural Resources Policy.

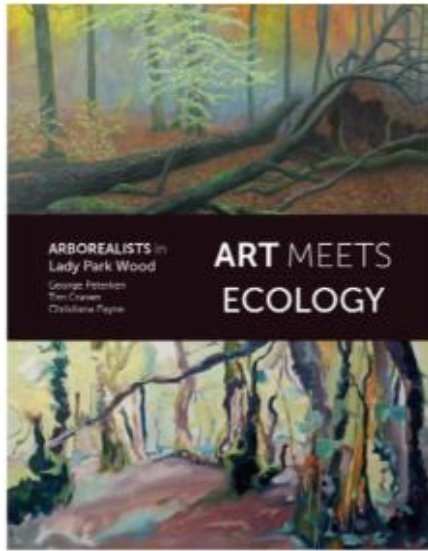
The Wye Valley River Festival is a regular and significant proportion of the fund. Whilst the level of funding has generally remained static, the overall value of the project is increasing and so there is increasing value for money in supporting this initiative. The outcomes of the project are significant and provided it continues to be assessed competitively, ongoing support will continue to provide considerable benefit to Wye Valley. *N.B. 19/20 A further £10,375 was agreed as a further commitment, from unallocated funds. Whilst this does appear to meet the grant conditions, some further detail on the additional elements to be delivered as a requirement for the extra funding would be welcomed here, over and above that provided.*

Sustainability, climate change and biodiversity

Biodiversity and landscape are well represented, with delivery of small, individual schemes significantly supplemented by the dedicated Landscape and Biodiversity Enhancement Grant. These include a number of small hedge planting and hedgelaying projects, creation of wood pasture and increased connectivity to existing woodland. Discussion with a project applicant for one of the hedging projects highlighted the additional benefits of the funding,

including significant value placed on the advice provided by the AONB Team, networking with like-minded individuals, positive engagement with the local community and an interest and commitment to self-financing of further enhancements on their own land.

Project delivery by Gwent Wildlife Trust provide further examples of delivery for biodiversity, including trainee schemes, species monitoring and habitat management through the purchase of machinery as part of the SDF. Furthermore, natural flood management farm advice has put in place plans for nature-based solutions, biodiversity enhancement and carbon sequestration.



Understanding of biodiversity is greatly enhanced through projects such as the Arborealist exhibition and the Art Meets Ecology Book. The exhibition drew in large numbers, with positive feedback, whilst the book provided an extremely engaging and innovative approach to explain and increase understanding of woodland ecology through the artists' perspectives. It was highly commended by Peter Marren (an author and naturalist) who provides a glowing review of the book in the December, 2020, edition of [British Wildlife](#), recognising it as an 'exceptional collaboration of art and science that is genuinely inspired'.

An example of an invasive species project is provided, which is possibly the only targeted example seen within the evaluation period across each of the 5 AONBs. Whilst this may not fall within the criteria of innovation, given its importance in addressing biodiversity decline, this is a welcome addition to the funded projects, perhaps with the potential of benefitting from some further assurance on a commitment to continue with treatment as part of a long-term strategy.

Targeted delivery against decarbonisation or climate change is more limited, over and above that provided as part of planting / natural carbon sequestration or awareness raising / facilitating positive behaviour change (see below).

[Sustainable and healthy communities](#)

There is a strong theme here of community involvement, well-being and community cohesion, engagement with the natural environment and local cultures. The [Wye Valley River Festival](#) is an exemplar project in bringing together of art and the environment to celebrate and increase understanding of the landscape. It is, by now, a well-established and prominent festival that takes place over 2 weeks and 3 weekends every two years, staging outdoor arts events that celebrates and interprets the River Wye, the countryside and its communities.

The festival seeks to encourage inclusivity and accessibility, providing examples of targeted intervention to break down barriers for engagement. Affordability is a strong ethos of the festival and whilst they are exploring charging for access to certain activities (to support economic sustainability), by and large they are looking to provide these activities for free.

Support by SDF has been central to the success of the festival, with the group now having evolved into a Community Interest Company (CIC), and secured significant additional funding to grow the scale, and impact, of the festival.

The Words and Landscapes Project, delivered by Friends of our Lady of Tintern, builds on the themes of culture and well-being, having developed a spiritual and well-being walk. Whilst the Lantern Parade, by Monmouth Town Council, supports social well-being and community cohesion, utilising a theme of 'creatures of the wye', providing further benefit in awareness raising of the natural environment.

Access improvements on the Wordsworth Walk, a high-profile route with strong cultural roots, has provided benefits to residents and visitors, alongside habitat improvement work and addressing of garden waste fly-tipping. The project provided an opportunity for volunteer input and community involvement, providing benefits to well-being, skills-development and community cohesion. The profile of the AONB was reported as being improved through engagement with the community.

Delivery of projects with emphasis on the Welsh language was limited, although it is recognised that Welsh is not as prominent here as in other AONB areas. Printed material, such as the Tintern Old Station Family Pack (Ostin the Dormouse) have been produced bilingually.

To generate **greater awareness and understanding** of sustainability amongst residents and visitors, and facilitate **positive behaviour change**

As highlighted already, awareness raising and facilitating positive behaviour change is a strong theme for the Wye Valley. Wye Valley River Festival delivers extremely positively on awareness raising and understanding of sustainability issues, providing innovative and imaginative connections between arts and environment. Sustainability is clearly a key focus in development and delivery of the festival; as they state prominently on their website:



This approach is also seen in delivery of Monmouth Climate Futures Festival, the aim of which was to engage with the local community to raise awareness of, and promote positive action to address, the climate emergency. Local residents were supported to develop links with relevant projects and groups; a successful approach, with an example reported of 41 new individuals signing up to the Friends of the Lower Wye Group during one of the events.



The Tintern Old Station Family Pack has been created to draw in visitors to the site, providing activities that are environmentally friendly and introducing themes of sustainability and biodiversity. They were created in collaboration with Monmouthshire Council's Green Infrastructure Team to ensure biodiversity was appropriately represented and sustainability of production could be maximised (such as materials used, printing, etc). Although a proportionally small cost to SDF (£688), the project drew down additional funding, with a significant additional investment of staff time, acting as a pilot to develop a more extensive range of activity packs, forming part of a more long-term strategy to deliver biodiversity awareness raising material across the County.

Facilitation of targeted positive action for biodiversity has also been seen, with the Natural Flood Management Farm Advice scheme providing farm plans for 6 landowners, setting in place a framework for targeted action for biodiversity, carbon management and green infrastructure enhancements.

To deliver and promote the [purposes of the AONB](#) and the [objectives as set out in the AONB Management Plan](#)

Enhancement of the natural beauty of the landscape is well represented, particularly through the contribution made by the Landscape and Biodiversity Enhancement scheme, engaging with a steady flow of landowners in boundary / biodiversity projects each year. Contribution towards the historic and built environment is more limited, although there are examples of stone wall restoration within the evaluation period.

Delivery of biodiversity and landscape projects have also facilitated support of local heritage skills, such as hedgelaying and dry-stone walling, providing greater opportunity for use in the wider landscape. The Gwent Wildlife Trust trainee scheme provided focused and conservation focused training for aspiring conservationists, boosting their employability in the field of nature conservation.

The promoted festivals provide a significant boost as a tourism offer, drawing people into the area and supporting investment in the local economy. There are a number of projects which have supported access and tourism through infrastructure improvement and promotional material, valuable to local residents as much as visitors. The festivals also support small local businesses, artists and event providers in their delivery, further supporting development and sustainability of micro businesses.

Engagement with project applicants identified a good level of awareness of the importance of the AONB, reporting on supporting efforts to raise awareness of the AONB and the SDF. The Pine Marten Project continue to reference SDF on the [Gwent Wildlife Trust website](#), the role of the Wye Valley AONB and the SDF is recognised by the [Wye Valley River Festival](#) and the Art Meets Ecology Book by the Arborealists acknowledges both the fund and Wye Valley AONB within the book.

3.2.6 Generic Observations

In addition to the detail provided for each AONB, the following observations were made more generally across the funded schemes as a whole:

- Detail on biodiversity and natural landscape outputs and outcomes were limited, although clearly there are good examples of projects delivering against these areas and there is some further detail provided in the text (particularly for Gower). Furthermore, it was unclear whether there was a requirement, or general principle, that biodiversity shouldn't be negatively impacted by projects in general.
- The level of promotion of the AONB / impact of the SDF is generally unclear. This is not strongly reported on within the reports, although it was picked up occasionally on individual project websites, and logos were appropriately used where posters were provided as evidence. Wye Valley report that they provide advice to applicants on producing press releases and are encouraged to promote SDF, with stronger evidence of this seen in the selected projects here. An increased profile of the fund and its impact would be beneficial.
- Inclusivity and diversity, particularly in terms of ethnicity, is somewhat limited. Wye Valley River Festival and Gower YMCA Project provide a welcome contribution towards this requirement. Given increasing awareness of the lack of diversity in the environment sector, support of projects which seek to break down barriers for engagement would be beneficial, where this is relevant and representative of individual areas.
- Sustainable Development (SD) Principles. CRDV and Anglesey: Project applicants are required to demonstrate that their projects are in accordance with the sustainable development principles, their response to which is considered by the panel as part of the decision-making process. Gower and Wye Valley set out a requirement in their annual reports that all projects must meet at least 2 elements of SD principles. This is currently not clarified by Llŷn in the annual report. Whilst evaluations of SD principles are not presented in the Annual Reports, the nature of the successful projects do often indicate a compliance with at least some of the SD principles.
- Generally, the fund is fully allocated with just a couple of instances where they have been underspent or have reallocated into other projects. If there was more active promotion of the grant, and it was more high profile, there would certainly be demand for an increase in the level of funding. As an interim, there would be merit in providing an additional collaborative fund, which would provide increased funding to areas with more capacity / higher demand and increase the opportunity for sharing of best practice.
- There has been some feedback from projects that match funding requirements or restrictions on revenue spend has been challenging, although where this has been the case, the requirements appear to be more onerous than that set by Welsh Government.

3.2.7 Overview of Project Delivery

During the 3-year evaluation period, a total of £1,039,683 was drawn down across the five AONBs. Significant match funding has been demonstrated, reported as a total of £3,365,689, providing an intervention rate of 31% for the SDF, painting an extremely positive picture of the additional monetary value that is achieved through delivery of the SDF.

Across the three years, the funding supported delivery against 212 projects. *N.B. this figure does include some projects across multiple years, e.g., a three-year project would have been counted 3 times here.*

Project delivery is reflective of local areas and AONB priorities, and it's appropriate that delivery and project focus should be able to focus on the areas that have been identified as important locally.

The preceding section highlights strengths in delivery within each AONB, whilst identifying themes, or criteria, where there is scope for more focused delivery. In consideration of each broad criteria, delivery as a whole is summarised below:

Sustainability, climate change and biodiversity

Delivery against biodiversity and sustainability is generally well represented, with more limited delivery where highlighted. Reporting on outputs and outcomes typically did not reflect the positive outcomes that were being achieved.

Although not a prominent theme, there are examples of delivery against climate change, including reduction of travel / electrification, awareness raising of more general sustainability issues and carbon sequestration as a secondary benefit from nature-based solutions.

Delivery against these policy areas is anticipated to become increasingly important as efforts are made to deliver on the national nature and climate emergencies and biodiversity deep dive recommendations.

Sustainable and health communities

There was strong delivery against this theme, with extensive levels of engagement, reflective of local priorities and cultures. Projects which involved the community in project development and delivery, and efforts to ensure inclusivity, were more focused in some areas than others.

Awareness raising and positive behaviour change

These was a good range of projects delivering against this requirement, with some examples of projects providing an exceptional focus on engagement and behaviour change in sustainability issues.

Purposes of the AONB

This is a broad category, and effective delivery can be demonstrated against each purpose of the AONB, and delivery of the priorities set out within each management plan. Whilst

there are localised priorities, and more targeted delivery on some elements, as highlighted within Sect. 3.2, in terms of overall impact, the SDF has delivered well against this category.

4 Summary and Recommendations

4.1 Overview

Implementation of the Sustainable Development Fund has enabled extensive delivery against key priorities for Welsh Government, as well as supporting delivery of the Management Plans. Whilst it's felt that the impact of the fund isn't fully appreciated through the current reporting and promotional processes, it should be stressed that the impact of the fund and delivery against the purposes was found to be extremely positive.

Of note, the SDF is highly valued by delivery partners and stakeholders, and the support structure that is in place for project applicants and grant recipients empowers community members to deliver locally, as part of project delivery and also beyond the life of their project. It has also provided the opportunity to raise the profile of the AONB, creating links and collaboration between AONB Teams and communities.

There has been increased investment in the fund by Welsh Government, which has benefitted delivery locally. There is scope, and demand, for further investment, in some areas more than others, offering an opportunity to consider collaborative grants as an interim to raise the profile of the fund further.

There is a strong indication of increasing national priority for delivery for nature recovery and climate action and a refresh at this stage provides an ideal opportunity to demonstrate the role that the SDF has in empowering local communities in delivering against these challenges.

There are several observations made throughout this report, where it's felt there is scope to refine or refresh processes and documentation, and to raise the profile of the fund. Furthermore, potential areas for more targeted delivery against some key priorities have been provided. These are outlined in more detail in Sections 2.4 (grant processes), 3.2.6 (generic observations) and 3.2.7 (project overview).

4.2 Recommendations

This section sets out recommendations on how to address the observations made in this report, providing an opportunity to strengthen and build on the existing success of this fund.

A suggested organisational lead is provided for each recommendation; however, for implementation to be effective, it is vital that this is done collaboratively between Welsh Government, NAAONB, NRW and the AONB Teams. There are opportunities to share examples of good practice / documentation and changes can be agreed which are deliverable and practicable. A key strength of the AONB SDF framework is the collaborative

nature of implementation, with each AONB well placed to guide and inform delivery mechanisms.

Recommendation 1: NAAONB to coordinate and facilitate a Task and Finish Group to undertake a refresh of grant documents.

These should include (but not be limited to):

- Refresh / alignment of grant purposes
- Update to the criteria / scoring method that is provided to individual applicants (in line with the guidance / grant purposes)
- Collaboration on a reporting template for projects
- Agreeing a more systematic approach to the annual reports that are provided to Welsh Government, to include headline indicators / national priorities.

Recommendation 2: NAAONB to develop, and deliver, a training package to support effective governance, processes and decision making for AONB Panels.

Recommendation 3: Welsh Government to provide increased presence at AONB Panels, to support sharing of knowledge, best practice and national priorities.

Recommendation 4: AONB Teams to review observations made for individual AONBs to identify potential opportunities for more targeted delivery.

Recommendation 5: AONB Teams to support efforts to increase the profile of the fund.

This could include (but not be limited to):

- More targeted reporting (responding to implementation of recommendation 1), ensuring alignment with key priorities
- Increased use of case studies, video recordings, etc.
- Encourage greater promotion of the fund and celebration of the AONB by grant recipients.

Recommendation 6: NAAONB (or Welsh Government) to provide a coordinating role in raising the profile of the fund nationally.

Depending on available resources, potential opportunities include:

- A celebration event
- Utilisation of case studies / flagship projects to engage with key partners, Welsh Government Ministers and personnel
- Creation of a 'highlights from all AONBs' document
- Increased online presence of the fund with case studies / exemplar projects (potentially on the NAAONB website).

Recommendation 7: Maintain dialogue and collaborative working between Welsh Government, AONB Teams, NAAONB and NRW to ensure wider issues and opportunities highlighted in this report can be addressed.

4.3 Forward Look

It's recognised that staff capacity is limited within the AONB Teams, and appropriate support would ideally be provided to take forward the findings of this reports. Input from the key partners is clearly vital, however pressure on AONB Teams could be reduced by provision of a coordinating person to pull together thoughts and draft up amendments for further input.

It's felt that the NAAONB are ideally placed to provide oversight and co-ordination for many of the recommendations, either through existing staff resources (should there be capacity) or drawing in some additional support.

Timescale for implementation of each recommendation should be agreed collaboratively, remaining mindful of the current SDF funding cycle and the ability to demonstrate progress in responding to the findings of this evaluation.

Appendix 1: Key parties engaged

AONB Leads and their Respective SDF Officers:

Anglesey: Alun Owen (AONB Lead) and William Stockwell (AONB Project Officer)

Wye Valley: Andrew Blake (AONB Lead) and Lucinda James (Community Links Officer)

Llŷn: Bleddyn Prys Jones (AONB Lead) and Morus Llwyd Dafydd (SDF Lead)

Clwydian Range and Dee Valley: Howard Sutcliffe (AONB Lead), David Shiel (AONB Manager), Ceri Lloyd (Sustainable Development Officer)

Gower: Mike Scott (AONB Lead)

Welsh Government Designated Landscape Team

Tom Cosson, Thom Hadfield

Natural Resources Wales Landscapes Team

Keith Davies, Carole Rothwell

Natural Resources Wales Representatives on SDF Assessment Panels

Molly Lovatt, Sarah Tindall

NAAONB

John Watkins, Ieuan Llyr Jones

Landscape Wales

Ruth Lovell

National Park SDF Lead

Angela Jones (Eryri), Barbara Anglezarke (Bannau Brycheiniog), Jessica Morgan (Pembrokeshire)

Grant Recipients. Projects Visited

Anglesey

- AONB Community Warden (Visit)
- Mesolithic Anglesey Project (Visit)
- Babi Actif (Teams meeting)
- Afan Wygyr Water Quality, North Wales Rivers Trust (Visit)
- Geo Kayaking, B-active (Phone call)

Wye Valley

- Wye Valley River Festival (Teams meeting)
- GWT Trainees and Pine Marten Monitoring, Gwent Wildlife Trust (Visit)
- Art Meets Ecology and Arborealists Exhibition, Arborealists (Teams meeting)
- Tintern Old Station Family Pack, Môn Life (Teams meeting and site visit)
- Hedging Project (Teams meeting)

Llŷn

- RS Thomas Festival (Visit)
- Tafarn yr Heliwr (Visit)
- Bws Arfordir Llŷn (Teams meeting)
- Capel Ceidio (Visit)
- Brain Croesgoch (Chough), RSPB (Teams meeting)

Clwydian Range Dee Valley

- Stay Eat Do, Clwydian Range Tourism Group (Teams meeting)
- Gwaenysgor Well Restoration, Gwaenysgor Conservation Group (Visit)
- Gwlangollen (Visit)
- Tafarn y Gelyn Pond (Visit)
- Robocut Habitat Management, AONB Team (Visit)

Gower

- Rivers of Gower, West Wales Rivers Trust (Teams meeting)
- Developing the Trainer and Training the Growers, Cae Tân CSA (Visit)
- Gower Flax (Visit)
- Gower Sea Rowing Club (Teams meeting)
- Taste of Gower (Visit)

Appendix 2: Project Grant Requirements – Guidance Document

1. The purposes

- To explore innovative ways of contributing to the opportunities and challenges set out in the Welsh Government’s current agenda for the environment and sustainability, including, specifically, the **Well-Being and Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015** and the **Natural Resources Policy** (which facilitates the implementation of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016)
- To build capacity in local communities, and to develop and support community-based projects promoting sustainable development objectives
- To generate greater awareness and understanding of sustainability amongst residents and visitors, and facilitate positive behaviour change
- To deliver and promote the purposes of the AONB and the objectives as set out in the AONB Management Plan.

2. Must also support **primary purpose of the AONB** – conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape

3. Secondary aims

- to promote sustainable forms of economic and social development of local communities, and;
- meet recreational demands, so long as it is consistent with the conservation of the area, and with the needs of agriculture, forestry and other land uses.

4. One or more of the **priorities set out in Valued and Resilient**

- Valued places (about a more diverse cross section of society being engaged and involved in decision making). E.g., enhanced outdoor education/ volunteering, tackling inequalities, creation of broad partnerships to provide meaningful opportunities to participate)
- Resilient environments (reversing decline in biodiversity, sustainable management of natural resources)
- Resilient communities (economic and social resilience, creating opportunities for employment)
- Resilient ways of working (collaborative working – between and within)

5. Well-being Goals (the need to demonstrate how they contribute to the following)

- A prosperous Wales
- A resilient Wales
- A healthier Wales
- A more equal Wales
- A Wales of cohesive communities
- A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language
- A globally responsible Wales

6. Natural Resource Policy to be considered in developing and assessing SDF project. Three national priorities: delivering nature-based solutions, increasing renewable energy and resource efficient and taking a place-based approach. (Schedule 1 also sets out the four headline opportunities and three main challenges).

7. Partnerships – projects that encompass **joint working should be prioritised**.