Dadansoddi ar gyfer Polisi

YMCHWIL GYMDEITHASOL Y LLYWODRAETH

GSR

GOVERNMENT SOCIAL RESEARCH

Analysis for Policy

Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Social research number: 62/2025

Publication date: 01/07/2025

National Forest for Wales: mid-term evaluation. Phase 1 report.

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

This document is also available in Welsh.

 Digital ISBN 978-1-83715-895-9

National Forest for Wales: mid-term evaluation

Phase 1 report

Authors: Andy Parkinson, Anna Burgess, Megan Clark,

Dr Nikola Vousden and Rhys Maher

Full Research Report: [Parkinson, A; Burgess A; Clark, M; Vousden, N; Maher, R. (2025). National Forest for Wales: mid-term evaluation. Phase 1 report. Cardiff: Welsh Government, GSR report number 62/2025

Available at: https://www.gov.wales/national-forest-wales-mid-term-evaluation-phase-1-report

For further information please contact:

Climate and Environment Research Team

Social Research and Information Division

Welsh Government

Cathays Park

Cardiff

CF10 3NQ

climateandenvironmentresearch@gov.wales

Table of contents

List of tables

List of figures

Glossary

Acronym and definition

CIC - Community Interest Company

FIRS - Forestry Industry Recovery Scheme

KWT - Keep Wales Tidy

MTOF - My Tree Our Forest

NLHF-National Lottery Heritage Fund

NRW - Natural Resources Wales

SFS - Sustainable Farming Scheme

TWIG - The Woodland Investment Grant

UK SPF - UK Shared Prosperity Fund

WGWE - Welsh Government Woodland Estate

WLO - Woodland Liaison Officer

1. Introduction/Background

The Welsh Government set out its commitment to create a National Forest for Wales in Spring 2020. This initially came from the First Minister's leadership manifesto and was intended to create a National Forest covering the length and breadth of Wales, making it accessible to everyone. The National Forest is a national, decades long project on a similar scale to the Wales Coastal Path, an 870-mile-long continuous coastal footpath which stretches along the entire length of the Welsh coastline. Following the announcement to create a National Forest, a demonstrator scheme was delivered in the 2020 to 2021 financial year. This scheme intended to start activity on the ground and test different funding and delivery mechanisms to inform plans to develop and deliver the National Forest. The National Forest Demonstrator Scheme included four separate schemes:

- National Lottery Heritage Fund Community Woodlands Scheme (this scheme ran over two years whilst the remaining below were delivered over one year)
- Keep Wales Tidy
    - Coetiroedd Bach (Tiny Forests)
    - Tree planting in schools – delivered through the Eco-Schools Programme
- Natural Resources Wales (NRW) Enhancement scheme
- Forestry Industry Recovery Scheme (FIRS)

The scheme was evaluated in 2021 with the report published in early 2022 (Falzon, Tanner and Welford, 2022). Key findings from this evaluation is provided in Annex A.

The aim of the National Forest is to restore and maintain existing woodland and connect them with new woodland areas through tree planting. The National Forest network is being established through bringing existing woodland sites into the network. In autumn 2020, the first 14 National Forest sites were announced, which were part of the Welsh Government Woodland Estate (WGWE) and managed and maintained by Natural Resources Wales (NRW).

The current Programme for Government 2021 – 2026, updated to reflect the Co-operation Agreement with Plaid Cymru, continues this commitment to 'create a National Forest to extend from the North of Wales to the South.'[footnote 1]

Following on from the National Forest Demonstrators scheme, the Welsh Government developed a National Forest delivery model to support and prepare woodland sites to join the National Forest network. This model includes a range of delivery mechanisms including staff roles, funding, resources, and the National Forest Status Scheme. Detail on each delivery mechanism and their aims is provided in Section 1.1 below.

Footnotes

[1] Together we can create a National Forest the length and breadth of Wales. 12 March 2020.

1.1. Overview of delivery mechanisms

1.1.1. The Woodland Investment Grant (TWIG)

- Date introduced: June 2022
- Aim: To support woodland creation, enhancement, and restoration, developing a pipeline of future National Forest sites.

The Woodland Investment Grant (TWIG) opened to applications in June 2022 following the successful delivery of the pilot in 2021. As of February 2025, the activities funded by the grant are still being delivered. TWIG is administered on behalf of the Welsh Government by National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) who also contribute funding to the scheme. The grant provides financial support for people to create, enhance and restore existing woodlands in accordance with the UK Forestry Standard. TWIG aims to develop a pipeline of sites that could be part of the National Forest in the future.

1.1.2. My Tree Our Forest (MTOF)

- Date introduced: November 2022
- Aim: To provide trees to households and landowners to promote tree planting and make early contributions to the National Forest for Wales.In November 2022, My Tree Our Forest (MTOF) was announced. This initiative was designed to grow the National Forest for Wales, household by household. Coed Cadw facilitated over 50 hubs, in partnership with the Welsh Government and Llais y Goedwig. Households could collect a tree from these hubs free of charge or organise delivery to their home. Landowners (including community groups) were also given the opportunity to plant trees as part of a ‘Plant a Tree for Me’ initiative. There were 200,000 trees available to give away through MTOF initially. The initiative ran until March 2023.

1.1.3. Woodland Liaison Officers (WLOs)

- Date introduced: September 2022
- Aim: To support woodland owners through the National Forest Status Scheme, signposts funding opportunities, and provides woodland management guidance.

In March 2023, the Welsh Government announced the National Forest Wales Woodland Liaison Officers (WLOs) based in Natural Resources Wales (NRW).[footnote 2] Their role was put in place to help facilitate and enable woodland owners with their ambitions to create and enhance woodlands and develop the National Forest for Wales network. This entails supporting woodland owners to create and enhance woodland sites, signpost to relevant schemes and deliver the National Forest Status Scheme described in section 3.2.

The WLOs also offer advice with applications for TWIG and for Coetiroedd Bach (Tiny Forest), a grant scheme also delivered by NLHF which opened in April 2023 with the aim of creating 100 ‘Tiny Forests’ between April 2023 and March 2025.

[2] Please note that the WLO team was first formed in September 2022, with all team members recruited by January 2023.

1.1.4. Coetiroedd Bach (Tiny Forest) Grant

- Date introduced: April 2023
- Aim: To create 100 ‘Tiny Forests’ across Wales between 2023 and 2025 to enhance biodiversity and green spaces.

1.1.5. National Forest for Wales Status Scheme

- Date introduced: June 2023
- Aim: To enable woodlands to join the National Forest network by meeting National Forest Outcomes and maintaining a woodland management plan.

In June 2023, the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme opened to enable non-WGWE woodlands to join the National Forest network, including not-for-profit organisations and private owners who have management control or own woodlands in Wales. To secure status, applicants must show how their site meets the National Forest Outcomes (outlined below). There is one essential outcome which must be met (and evidenced by having a woodland management plan in place) and the remaining outcomes are desirable but not essential.

The six high level outcomes for the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme are:

Essential outcome:

- good quality, well designed and managed resilient woodlands.

Desirable outcomes

- woodlands accessible to people
- community involvement in woodlands
- connected woodlands
- dynamic, multi-purpose woodlands and trees
- woodlands that demonstrate learning, research, and innovation.

The Status Scheme is not a funding opportunity; it is an opportunity to be part of a network of woodlands across Wales. Network meetings commenced in March 2024. Within this network, sites have access to a wide range of support from their WLO and resources including online webinars, opportunities to share, learn and collaborate with other site managers, in person events, signage and information boards, professional photography and video footage and free promotion via Visit Wales.

1.2. Legislative and policy background

The Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015) sets out the Welsh Government (and other Wales public bodies’) commitment to the Sustainable Development Principle. The principle puts forward the intention to support the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of Wales, meeting the needs of people now and in the future. The Act sets out seven Well-being goals, including ‘a resilient Wales’ that promotes biodiverse natural

environments that support social, economic and ecological resilience' and 'a healthier Wales' which maximises people's physical and mental well-being'.

The overarching goals of the National Forest for Wales programme responds directly to the goals outlined in the Act. Most notably by protecting nature and addressing biodiversity loss through the outcome of good quality, well-managed and designed resilient woodlands and by supporting the health and wellbeing of communities through encouraging community involvement in woodlands.

The Environment Act (Wales) 2016 gave legal force to the Welsh Government's commitment to securing healthy, resilient, and productive ecosystems for the future whilst meeting challenges of creating jobs, housing, and infrastructure. The Act sets out a duty to set targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to manage natural resources in a way that builds resilience of nature systems. The Act looks to support the natural environment to continue to provide benefits over the long term. The design of the National Forest for Wales is consistent with this Act as it aims to provide longer-term environmental benefits and a lasting legacy for future generations through the network of sites.

The overarching aims of the National Forest for Wales originate from the Woodlands for Wales Strategy which outlines a 50-year strategy for woodlands and trees in Wales. The vision in the current version of the strategy published in 2018 remains the same as it was in 2001, in that 'Wales will be known for its high-quality woodlands that enhance the landscape, are appropriate to local conditions and have a diverse mixture of species and habitats'.

The strategy fits into the wider framework provided by the Well-being of Future Generation Act (2015) and the Environment Act (2016) which sets out the Well-being Goals and Principles for the sustainable management of natural resources.

The Woodlands for Wales Strategy sets out an ambition to achieve at least a minimum planting rate of 2,000ha each year. Tree cover in the wider environment should also increase. At the heart of the strategy is the aim to increase tree planting to support woodland expansion and ensuring good woodland management with trees suitable for the local environment and a diverse mixture of species and habitats.

The strategy is built around four strategic themes, all linked to the Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015) well-being goals

- responding to climate change – through reducing carbon footprint and supporting an innovative, productive, and low carbon society.
- woodlands for people – that serve local needs in health, education and jobs and support the well-being of people and communities more widely.
- a competitive and integrated forest sector – supporting innovative and skilled industries and workers, promoting employment opportunities, and securing decent work; and
- environmental quality – supporting the enhancement of biodiverse natural environments and ecosystems that support resilience.

The National Forest for Wales programme cuts across all four themes outlined in the Woodlands for Wales Strategy.

1.3. Research aims and objectives

In June 2024, the Welsh Government commissioned Wavehill to undertake an independent evaluation of the National Forest for Wales programme. The evaluation intends to cover delivery from late 2022 to late 2024, using process and impact evaluation methodologies. The main aims of the evaluation are to:

- evaluate the delivery of the National Forest for Wales so far, including funded support staff and grant funding available to landowners to help inform recommendations for future delivery models.
- understand how the National Forest is viewed by communities and members of the public and any experiences so far; and
- recommend a design for assessing impact in the future, including what should be built into the programme to support impact evaluation.

This Phase 1 report is focused on the delivery of the National Forest programme from 2022 onwards, including its delivery mechanisms, staff roles, funding and the National Forest Status scheme.

The next phase of the evaluation will focus on exploring the views and experiences of members of the public with regards to the National Forest and National Forest sites and understanding the impact evaluation methodologies that could be used to evaluate the National Forest in the future.

The evaluation will not look to measure the environmental impacts of delivery of the National Forest scheme because this is not the focus of the commissioned research.

1.4. Report structure and content

This report is divided into the following sections:

- Methodology
- Findings
- Emerging Outcomes and Impacts
- Conclusions
- Recommendations
- Annexes.

2. Methodology

This section sets out the methodology, detailing the research conducted between July and December 2024 and the key tasks still to be undertaken. An overview of the evaluation approach, phases and key tasks is provided below. This phase one report predominantly focuses on providing a process evaluation of the National Forest for Wales programme for the period 2022 to 2024.

Data has been collected using a mixed-method approach, triangulating qualitative and quantitative data sources to build a robust and comprehensive evidence base that helped the evaluation team address the key evaluation questions, as set out below (Section 2.3). This report addresses questions 1-8. The next phase of the evaluation will address question 9 and explore in further detail questions 2,3, 4,5 and 8.

2.1. Research Questions

The research questions that guide this evaluation are outlined below. Each question relates to a specific area of focus within the evaluation

2.1.1. Research Questions – Delivery

1. What has worked well and what could be improved about the delivery of the National Forest so far?
2. Have there been any unintended consequences from National Forest delivery?
3. How well were risks to activities and outputs identified and mitigated within the National Forest – to what extent and how did these risks impact on activities or outputs?
4. How effectively are communities (including Welsh Language communities) being involved within National Forest delivery? Are those involved primarily located in proximity to selected sites?
5. Are there particular groups for which there have been any barriers to involvement in National Forest delivery?
6. Based on the evaluation evidence, what elements are recommended to be taken forward for a future National Forest delivery model post-2025?

2.1.2. Research Question - Welsh Language

7. What are the experiences of application and delivery by organisations and individuals that have chosen to apply to funding schemes or the Status scheme in Welsh?

2.1.3. Research Question - National Forest Status Scheme

8. To what extent have sites changed the management of their sites as a result of applying for or gaining National Forest Status?

2.1.4. Research Question – Impact Evaluation Methodologies

9. What impact evaluation methodologies would be suitable to apply to evaluation of the National Forest in the future?

2.2. Approach to analysis

Because of the mixed methods data approach, data sources have been cross referenced with one another and analysed thematically. Qualitative data from interviews and open text survey responses have been coded using a thematic framework structured against the key research questions. This enabled read across through the various fieldwork approaches to identify common themes, assess prevalence and identify any diverging views or opinion expressed by different stakeholder groups. All qualitative data was thematically analysed using grounded theory methodologies (Bryman,1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). This means that the research has collected and analysed data and then enabled theories to emerge. This process has been inductive, with insights generated from the qualitative data analysis.

Quantitative data has been analysed using standard frequency counts and cross tabulations to analyse responses based on the support mechanism(s) sites had experience with. Secondary source data, including monitoring information captured by WLO team, has been reviewed alongside relevant policy and strategy documents to support assessments made in relation to the delivery of the National Forest for Wales programme since 2022.

2.3. Fieldwork delivery

The key evaluation activities have included the following:

- Semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with stakeholders from Welsh Government, and those delivering the support mechanisms in NRW, Coed Cadw, NLHF and Llais y Goedwig. A total of 10 interviews were completed. These interviews were used to develop an understanding of the context and development of the programme and capture perspectives on its delivery since 2022. Here on in the use of the term stakeholders is used to refer to this group.
- Initial site visits with the six members of the WLO team, with one in each of the area statement regions. These six site-visits were completed in August and September 2024 and included in-depth qualitative interviews with each WLO. These site visits and interviews focused on gathering feedback from the WLOs around their delivery experiences to date and any suggested areas for improvement for the programme.
- An in-person visit to one site in each area statement region, equating to six sites in total. These visits were used to consult with a range of organisations that have engaged with the WLO team and National Forest for Wales programme. Sites were selected based on recommendations provided by the WLO team and to engage different landowner types. The six sites selected for visits included a mixture of landowner types (e.g. private, community, charity) as well as those that had joined the Status Scheme and those that were working towards applying.

- These six site visits provided an opportunity to meet with and interview staff teams from the respective organisations. A total of 9 staff were interviewed across the six site visits. Semi structured discussions were also completed with 10 volunteers. Site visits were conducted between October and November 2024. Feedback and learning from these site visits are referenced at appropriate points throughout the report. Anonymised case studies for each site have been produced to illustrate the range of sites engaged and their journey into the network and are presented in full within Annex B.
- An online survey was disseminated in late October 2024 to organisations/sites that have joined the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme as well as recipients of either TWIG or Coetiroedd Bach. This was disseminated to 225 contacts supplied by NRW and NLHF, of which 37 were Status Scheme members and 188 were non-Status Scheme contacts (individuals/organisations that have engaged with and been supported by the WLO team). Two reminders were used to help to boost the response rate.
- Online survey responses were received from 46 respondents equating to a 20% response rate. This included 31 responses from Status Scheme Members (84% response rate) and 15 responses from non-Status Scheme contacts (8% response rate). Caution has been taken in interpreting responses from the cohort of non-Status Scheme contacts given that these are not necessarily representative of the wider range of organisations that have been engaged or supported by the WLO team.
- Survey respondents had experience of receiving support through a range of National Forest mechanisms, including: MTOF (five respondents); TWIG (24 respondents); Coetiroedd Bach (eight respondents); and wider support from the WLO team (33 respondents). Twenty of the respondents received support from more than one mechanism.
    - Of the 55 respondents, four had not applied to any of the support mechanisms and so were routed out of the survey. A further five respondents had not received any support from the National Forest mechanisms and were also routed out of the survey. Seven responses were included where the participant did not complete the full survey. Finally, not all respondents chose to answer each question meaning that the base number reported for each question will vary.
- Respondents to the survey were asked if they would be willing to take part in an in-depth interview. A total of 22 respondents provided their contact details to be contacted to arrange a follow-up interview. From these, interviews were successfully completed with 13 individuals in November 2024 with the remaining 9 not responding to the request for interview. Of these 13 individuals, 8 included Status Scheme members, 3 TWIG grant recipients, 1 Coetiroedd Bach grant recipients and 1 who had received support from a WLO but who decided not to proceed any further with the National Forest mechanisms.

- A desk-based review was conducted which included the Quarterly Activity Reports prepared by NRW and submitted to Welsh Government, relevant policy and strategy documents, and National Forest for Wales Scheme Guidance and Application Form.
- Wavehill received and reviewed anonymised National Forest for Wales application data for 37 successful applicants. Please note that these 37 applications were the only applications available at the time of analysis. This exercise was helpful in the identification of respective applicant's ambitions for their site and their responses to the six outcomes that govern the scheme. As this data was anonymised it has not been possible to link this to either the survey responses or in-depth interviews.
- Attendance at an in-person National Forest for Wales networking event hosted at Bryn Arau Duon in Carmarthenshire on the 15th October 2024. This was used as an opportunity to observe the meeting and gain understanding of the format and delivery of the National Forest for Wales Network. It was not used as part of any formal data capture about the network.

2.4. Limitations

As of February 2025, the National Forest comprises 26 WGWE blocks, which contain multiple woodland sites managed by NRW, and 55 non-WGWE sites which have joined through the National Forest Status Scheme and are managed by other landowners.[footnote 3] To date, this evaluation has focused on the non-WGWE sites. This is because WGWE sites have not been in receipt of National Forest Status Scheme support mechanisms. It is anticipated that there will be greater engagement with WGWE sites in Phase 2 of the evaluation.

The survey was disseminated to 37 of the 55 non-WGWE sites that have joined the Status Scheme. Eighteen sites applied for status while the evaluation fieldwork was happening and had not had status confirmed at the point the survey was circulated. As such, feedback from those responding to the survey is not necessarily representative of the whole cohort of 55 non-WGWE sites that have joined the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme.

Footnotes

[3] Correct as of 7th October 2024. Data provided by NRW. A full list of National Forest sites can be accessed on the National Forest for Wales network webpage.

3. Findings

This section of the report presents the findings relating to the delivery of the National Forest programme since 2022. It includes an assessment of how effectively the concept of the National Forest has been communicated and understood, how the delivery mechanisms have been implemented, progress in creating a network of woodland sites through the Status Scheme, and efforts to promote sharing and learning across sites through the establishment of the National Forest for Wales Network.

Please note that the National Forest Programme includes a range of delivery mechanisms (detail of the delivery mechanisms is provided in Section 1.1.). Whilst each delivery mechanism supports the wider programme, individual delivery mechanisms e.g., Woodland Liaison Officers and the Status Scheme, are not responsible for delivering the full National Forest Programme.

3.1. The concept of the National Forest for Wales

The origins of the concept for the National Forest can be found in the Woodlands for Wales Strategy which outlines a 50-year strategy for woodlands and trees in Wales. The Woodlands for Wales Strategy sets out an ambition to achieve high-quality woodlands that contribute to a better-quality environment throughout Wales, support thriving woodland-based industries and provide social and community benefits both locally and nationally.

The National Forest is intended to grow organically initially. However, it is recognised that future delivery will need to strategically fill geographical gaps in the network, such as through specific woodland creation. The strategy details that the development of a National Forest for Wales will take decades to deliver. Its overall aims are to:

- create new areas of woodland
- restore and maintain our existing woodlands
- protect nature and address biodiversity loss
- support our health and wellbeing
- provide spaces for leisure and nature
- help to capture and store carbon
- provide timber - a sustainable resource for construction.

It is hoped that the National Forest will also contribute to efforts to boost tourism and support the visitor economy. Details of the concept of the National Forest are articulated in its webpage.

All stakeholders interviewed supported the programme. However, a small number of stakeholders (3 of the 10 interviewees) reported being uncertain on whether the primary focus is on supporting the visitor economy through the creation of a national trail, or on environmental objectives such as tree planting, improving biodiversity, and expanding woodlands, which align with the core aims of the Woodlands for Wales Strategy.

Whilst the National Forest Programme is still in its relatively early stages of delivery, there was an observation by some stakeholders that to date the programme has focused on expanding the number of sites in the network and woodland management rather than woodland creation. This led to observations around the extent to which the network of sites are focused on creating new woodland cover in support of the woodland creation objectives in the Woodlands for Wales strategy.

In practice, this has been a deliberate approach of the NFfW Status Scheme, with an initial focus on creating a network of existing sites, followed by a gradual transition toward connecting these sites and establishing new ones through woodland creation. This reflects the early stage of development, where efforts are primarily concentrated on building the initial network and clarifying the overarching concept. Tree planting has formed part of the programme, through My Tree Our Forest and Coetiroedd Bach it is not the initial priority aim of the status scheme.

Interviews with Welsh Government identified concerns about the lower-than-anticipated demand for the Woodland Creation Grant, which, whilst not funded through the National Forest programme, supports the woodland creation targets set out in the Woodland for Wales strategy. Given the need for more tree planting in Wales to help meet carbon emission reduction goals and changes to how planting will be integrated into the Sustainable Farming Scheme, stakeholders raised questions about the extent to which the National Forest network should contribute to national woodland creation and tree planting targets.

A review of the first 37 application forms submitted for the National Forest Status Scheme suggests that around one third of sites have recently completed planting or are planning to create new woodland. This provides an indication that the network can and will contribute towards planting and woodland creation objectives even though this is not a mandatory requirement to join the Status Scheme. Other sites are planning to remove and fell existing trees and then replant with different species, for example to support biodiversity objectives or to tackle Ash Die Back. Whilst this could result in no net increase in trees or canopy cover it may contribute to the efforts to increase the prevalence of native woodland species when restoring planted woodlands and will likely create and restore resilient woodlands. Future plans highlighted by network members were varied as illustrated below:

> ‘Our long-term plan includes replanting native trees to replace trees felled due to death or wind. We are developing a tree nursery… a percentage of these young trees will be replanted in the woodland as well as in other woodlands locally.’ (Status Scheme application form)

> ‘We want to achieve the restoration of a 59ha ancient woodland and the regeneration of native trees and shrubs.’ (Status Scheme application form)

The next phase of the evaluation will explore how woodland creation could be more formally monitored as part of an overall approach to monitor and assess impact of the National Forest across various metrics, including woodland creation.

In evaluation interviews, a minority of stakeholders (three) noted that some members of the public may find it unclear whether sites participating in the Status Scheme are publicly accessible. While the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme guidance states that not all

sites are open to the public, some strategic and delivery stakeholders suggested that this message may not always be clear, potentially leading to confusion when a site is promoted as part of the Status Scheme.

Moving forward, variation in the levels of access to sites could influence how the National Forest is viewed and understood by communities and members of the public. Whilst this will be explored further in the next phase of the evaluation, it should be noted that to date the majority of sites that have joined the network are accessible to the public.

Interviews with two sites that were supported by the WLO team to apply to join the Status Scheme highlighted reservations about either enabling public access for the site or attracting growth in visitor numbers and community use.

> ‘We are probably not going to apply for National Forest status as the community forest emphasis of the scheme doesn’t fit with this. I would be concerned that having National Forest status would attract more visitors would damage the site.’ (Follow-up interview)

Interviews with the WLO team demonstrated a greater level of clarity around the concept of the National Forest and highlighted the important role they have played in helping landowners of woodland sites better understand the concept. However, the WLO team noted that some landowners expressed confusion, mistaking the scheme for other initiatives, such as the SFS, due to discussions around woodland coverage, or MTOF, which incorporates National Forest branding.

A majority (31) of the 33 survey respondents who provided comments related to the aims and outcomes of the National Forest Status scheme and the National Forest for Wales, demonstrated a shared understanding of the aims and outcomes that the scheme intends to deliver, including connecting woodlands across Wales, increasing public access to sites, maximising the wellbeing benefits for communities, increasing biodiversity and resilience against climate change and facilitating knowledge and resource exchange between site owners.

> ‘It is an attempt to unify as many woodlands across Wales as possible, that are considered in some measure to be utilized and experienced by local communities for ecological, social and educational benefits. The scheme will be made up of woodlands that vary in size and scope, but will reflect the ecological, social and educational benefits outlined by the application criteria’ (Survey respondent)

> ‘Network of woodland owners/ managers supported by the Welsh Government, working towards expanding the footprint of temperate rainforests.’ (Survey respondent)

In summary, whilst there is a consensus of support for the National Forest for Wales programme, it would be helpful for the concept, delivery approach and associated timelines to be restated and communicated to the key stakeholder organisations of NRW, Welsh Government, NLHF, Llais y Goedwig and Coed Cadw.

Providing clarification on the balance of the programme across its intended outcomes for nature, communities, and local visitor economies would be helpful as would the level of

synergy between the National Forest for Wales programme and other Welsh Government schemes such as the SFS (when it is introduced) and the Woodland Creation Grant.

3.2. Funding and grant support

There are a series of delivery mechanisms that have been established to support the delivery of the National Forest for Wales which will be explored in this sub-section. Detail on the delivery mechanisms can be found in Section 1.1.

3.3. The Woodland Investment Grant funding

TWIG opened to applications in June 2022 following the successful delivery of the pilot in 2021. This grant funding is administered on behalf of the Welsh Government by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and provides financial support to create, restore and enhance woodlands

One of the aims for this grant funding is that these woodlands will have the potential to be part of the National Forest network in the future, after completing their TWIG activity. For the TWIG scheme, applicants are required to meet the first three [footnote 4] of the six National Forest outcomes: [footnote 5]

- Good quality, well-designed and managed resilient woodlands
- Woodlands accessible to people
- Community involvement in woodlands.

They can also demonstrate how their project would contribute towards the following desirable outcomes:

- Connected woodlands
- Dynamic, multi-purpose woodlands and trees
- Woodlands that demonstrate learning, research, and innovation.

Since launch in June 2022, £7.168m has been awarded over five rounds to 41 sites across Wales (see Table 3.1). As of December 2024, all but one of these grants are still being delivered with grant expiry dates for the most recent in June 2026. One Round 1 project was completed in June 2024. Delivery of the outputs and outcomes from TWIG is ongoing and as such it is too soon to assess the outcomes and impacts achieved.

The increase in the number of grant awards and investment from Round 4 coincides with the creation of the WLO team, which provided capacity and expertise to engage woodland owners and to both encourage and support them to apply for TWIG funding.

Footnotes

[4] Please note that applicants to the Status Scheme are only required to meet the first outcome; a good quality, well-designed and managed resilient woodlands.

[5] The Woodland Investment Grant (round 5)

Table 3.1 Profile of TWIG grants

Round	Total grants	Grant Award
Round 1	6	£1,085,455
Round 2	3	£656,845
Round 3	3	£572,531
Round 4	9	£1,679,431
Round 5	20	£3,174,504
Total	**41**	**£7,168,766**

Source: National Lottery Heritage Fund

Analysis of data provided by the WLO team indicates that as of December 2024, 21 non-WGWE National Forest network sites also received the TWIG grant, equating to 38% of the 55 non-WGWE sites that have subsequently secured status. Two non-WGWE network sites were unsuccessful in their applications for TWIG funding with the remaining 32 sites not having applied for TWIG.

The review of the first 37 applications to join the Status Scheme demonstrate that a small number of sites have either applied to TWIG to support them in developing a management plan to enable them to apply to join the Status Scheme or are planning on applying to assist them in delivering their existing management plan.

> ‘We intend to submit an application to TWIG to support work in the short term that will enable sustainable long-term access for ancient woodland restoration and community and social forestry.’ (Status Scheme Application Form)

> ‘A successful funding bid to TWIG has facilitated the first woodland management plan to be written with a long-term vision, so that we can join the National Forest for Wales.’ (Status Scheme Application form)

TWIG funding has been a useful tool in supporting and encouraging organisations to apply for and ultimately join the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme. When asked in the National Forest Network members and grant recipients survey about the extent to which TWIG funding influenced their ability to apply for the status scheme, 14 TWIG recipients responded. Just under two thirds (9 sites) reported that TWIG played a big part in helping them to get in a position to apply. Only two survey respondents who received TWIG funding indicated that they would have been able to apply for National Forest status regardless of TWIG funding. This feedback suggests the important role that TWIG played in influencing sites’ ability to apply for the scheme.

Where survey respondents reported that TWIG played a big part in helping them to apply for the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme, this was commonly attributed to the use of TWIG funding to help organisations to improve the condition of their woodlands and to produce a management plan. Analysis of survey responses, in-depth interviews with a sample of sites and the review of the applications to join the Status Scheme demonstrates the various ways in which TWIG has, or will, support sites in achieving their objectives. Common themes reported by sites includes:

- Supporting tree planting
- Improving signage, way marking and interpretation

- Hosting volunteer and community days
- Linking and connecting different routes within the woodland site
- Improving the quality and accessibility of nature trails
- Promoting woodland sites to local communities
- Launching or developing learning and educational opportunities.

In-depth interviews with a sample of 13 sites, along with six site visits conducted by the evaluation team, highlighted that funding support, such as TWIG, has resulted in a range of benefits. In particular, two sites highlighted that support helped them to improve the quality and detail articulated within existing management plans and one site that it helped them to establish a new management plan where none previously existed. Similar benefits were identified within the evaluation team's review of the first 37 application forms to join the Status Scheme.

> 'The TWIG project has allowed us to develop and grow a volunteer group in the local community, who we have been providing training in wildlife surveying to record our base-line data that have never been recorded before in these woodlands, especially towards our lower plant life and red list woodland bird species.' (Status Scheme Application form)
>
> 'As part of the recent TWIG project, the trees planted in compartment were delivered through volunteer and community planting days, ensuring community engagement in the scheme.' (TWIG grant recipient)
>
> 'The TWIG grant has allowed us to employ a dedicated Ranger to spend time building up those community links by reaching out to the residents of the village and to wider communities and groups to connect with us and help us deliver objectives such as replanting in some of our woodlands.' (TWIG grant recipient)

One site has used their TWIG funding to deliver forest school activities and train their staff in Level 2/3 Forest School and Level 3 Outdoor First Aid. They have used the funding to create a play area and education shelter in the woodland and improve access by installing a new path and reflective notice and information boards. For sites that are publicly accessible, this research suggests that TWIG has enabled them to build their infrastructure that can host and support quality visits by local communities and groups in the years ahead.

Feedback provided by sites during in-depth interviews emphasised that the investment through TWIG can provide longer-term benefits in terms of visitor numbers, visitor experience and a range of learning and health opportunities and outcomes. This will be explored further in the next phase of the evaluation.

> 'The TWIG project also gave us the platform to host our festival, which included a food and craft fayre for local vendors, plus a demonstration area for local businesses to show local[ly] their traditional woodland skills, such as horse logging, leather tanning, black smithing, and green woodworking. We also supported local artists to perform music written about the woodlands.' TWIG grant recipient

One site that had joined the Status Scheme indicated that they had been unsuccessful in their TWIG application and that this had limited the progress they had made in engaging the community as they had hoped to use the funds to erect a temporary classroom on the site. Within six follow-up interviews, several sites reported that it would have been more difficult to achieve their ambitions in the absence of TWIG investment.

In interviews, two stakeholders raised that TWIG funding was oversubscribed whilst demand for the Woodland Creation Grant, which provides funding for the planting of trees and installation of fencing and gates for size of a minimum of 0.25 hectares was, in their view, comparatively low. Although the Woodland Creation Grant is not one of the delivery mechanisms of the National Forest for Wales programme, it is important to acknowledge that both delivery mechanisms support woodland creation. Although TWIG can and has supported smaller woodland creation projects, the WLO team have signposted landowners mainly interested in woodland creation to the Woodland Creation Grant.

Feedback captured from the survey of organisations/sites highlights that most (14 out of 18 respondents who responded to the question) of those in receipt of TWIG investment rated the support they received from their NLHF Investment Manager as either very or quite effective. No organisation rated the support they received as ineffective.

For those that had secured TWIG funding, two thirds (13 organisations) reported to be satisfied with the level of ongoing support from the NLHF Investment Manager and 5 organisations stated they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Two organisations expressed that they were not satisfied with ongoing support. One organisation reported that this was due to the perceived inflexibility of financial claim deadlines whilst the other organisation suggested that they faced issues created by NLHF staff turnover.

In summary, feedback from organisations/sites that have applied to or received TWIG investment or those planning to apply, suggests that it has played a valuable role in preparing sites to apply for National Forest status. This feedback suggests TWIG funding can support the growth in the National Forest network. Given the timeframes associated with the delivery of the grant, sites that have already joined the Status Scheme can also apply for TWIG funding to support activities that aim to contribute to the six high-level National Forest outcomes. An approach for measuring impact, including against these outcomes will be explored in further depth in Phase 2 of this evaluation.

As previously highlighted, TWIG was developed to support smaller scale woodland creation, enhancement, and restoration, developing a pipeline of future National Forest sites. Based on feedback from three in-depth stakeholder interviews, the evaluation team notes that the level of need or demand for TWIG funding moving forward may vary depending on the profile of sites that have joined the Status Scheme. For example, if larger, more well-established sites join the National Forest Status Scheme, they may neither need TWIG investment. The profile of sites coming into the National Forest for Wales network may also be shaped by the WLO team's delivery of a targeted 'landscape approach,' engaging specific landowner types or geographical areas currently underrepresented in the Status Scheme. It will also be informed by the needs or aspirations of prospective sites as outlined in their respective management plans. This is a consideration for the level of resource

allocated to TWIG (or similar) in the future as the level of demand may be influenced by the objectives of the sites seeking to join the National Forest for Wales network.

3.4. My Tree Our Forest

In November 2022, MTOF was announced, which started as a Welsh Government concept for a nationwide engagement campaign to encourage the people of Wales to play their part in planting the beginnings of a National Forest for Wales. It aimed to raise awareness of the need for tree planting as an effective means of mitigating the effects of climate change. The ambition was for every household in Wales to have the opportunity to receive a tree to plant and contribute to the creation of the National Forest. MTOF was designed as a multi-organisational effort in Wales to help build the National Forest for Wales.

It was delivered via a nationwide campaign which offered households the opportunity to plant a tree via the following routes.

a) To collect a tree from a volunteer run hub.

b) To request a postal tree by completing an online form on the Coed Cadw website.

c) Requesting a tree to be planted on a person's behalf through the 'Plant a Tree for Me' initiative. Trees requested via this route were planted by local landowners including National Trust, NRW, community groups, local councils, and private landowners.

Coed Cadw facilitated over 50 hubs, in partnership with the Welsh Government and Llais y Goedwig. The initiative ran until March 2023 and over 300,000 trees were planted across Wales through the different routes. Of the 300,000 trees:

- Over 34,000 were distributed by hubs
- over 33,000 were distributed by post,
- 17,500 were distributed through the Plant a Tree for Me campaign, and
- 225,000 were distributed to and subsequently planted by communities and private landowners. It is understood this element of the initiative was introduced as a result of uptake.

Whilst this evaluation does not focus on delivery from Coed Cadw and the hubs, the project closure report [footnote 6] does provide some useful lessons learned in the delivery of the scheme. This report acknowledged that the intention that most of the tree planting would occur through households planting trees through collection from hubs or delivery of trees to their house was not feasible. However, the report did not provide specific details on why this approach was not possible.

Footnotes

[6] Coed Cadw (2023)- 'My Tree, Our Forest 2021-2023'. Project Closure Report.

The review of participant experience [footnote 7] produced by the Coed Cadw in July 2023 found that the scheme has been successful in getting people in Wales to plant a tree for the first time, with 38% of participants being new to tree planting. Based on participant's self-reported levels of environmental action, it was also successful in attracting the 'non-Green' audience with less conservation experience.

The project closure report outlines both opportunities and challenges for building the National Forest for Wales. Stakeholders noted that the hubs were not a sustainable national offer, as they relied on volunteer goodwill, limited staff capacity, and pre-existing contracts. Delivery partners felt the model was not viable for future replication but saw potential in a more focused approach. The success of tree packs for landowners—supported by landowner agreements and care guidance—was highlighted as an area to build on, alongside further exploration of links with the Eco Schools programme, which empowers young people to drive environmental change in their schools and communities. Some engagement has already taken place, such as Oak Field in Barry's aspiration to become the first National Forest school, a site which has subsequently been confirmed as a Status Scheme site.

The MTOF project closure report and stakeholder interviews conducted within this research provide evidence that MTOF delivered momentum and profile for the National Forest for Wales programme and positive participant experiences. The campaign contributed to the wider National Forest for Wales programme through engagement of landowners who may have or will subsequently seek investment through TWIG or Coetiroedd Bach and consider applying to the National Forest Status Scheme. Only four sites that planted trees through the MTOF campaign responded to the survey. Of these sites, two had also applied to join the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme. This indicates that there are potential opportunities to strengthen linkages between tree-planting initiatives such as MTOF and National Forest status.

All stakeholders interviewed within this evaluation supported efforts to raise awareness of the National Forest for Wales programme and sites, and in doing so encourage people to get involved either as visitors or volunteers. The case study site visits, for example, highlighted the important role that volunteers are playing in the management, maintenance and development of National Forest sites. The model of using a national campaign to engage communities and encourage environmental action could be considered as part of any future promotional work to support the development and delivery of the National Forest for Wales programme.

3.5. Coetiroedd Bach funding

In April 2023, applications for the Coetiroedd Bach grant opened, also following a pilot delivered in 2020. This grant was also administered by NLHF on behalf of Welsh Government and delivered through Earth Watch it was also funded as part of the National Forest for Wales programme. This grant aimed to create 100 'Tiny Forests' between April 2023 and the end of March 2025 and provide financial assistance to people to create Tiny

[7] The review of participant experience was drawn from a sample of 1,100 participants who were surveyed about their experience of the initiative, including what motivated them to take part, what went well and what could have been improved.

Forests. Grants of between £10,000 and £40,000 were available for sites of around 200m^2 in size to apply for. Grants could cover both capital and revenue costs. Advice was available through the WLO team for sites looking to plan their project.

Sites which secured grant funding were required to adhere to the Tiny Forest principles. The principles include bringing the benefits of woodlands into the heart of cities and urban spaces through connecting people with nature, providing educational opportunities to local people, helping to mitigate the impacts of climate change, and providing spaces to support wildlife.

Sites received training and support from Earthwatch around the principles needed for creating a Tiny Forest and the approach to planting and are required to carry out habitat monitoring a minimum of twice a year in the first two years after planting, preferably through citizen science. [footnote 8] This data is uploaded via a portal to Earthwatch. As the objectives of Coetiroedd Bach overlap and completely align with those of the National Forest, the Welsh Government decided that sites would automatically become members of the network once planted.

Since the Coetiroedd Bach launch in April 2023, £0.847m has been awarded over three rounds to 14 programmes, with 24 sites across Wales (see Table 3.2). As such, currently this delivery mechanism is likely to fall short of the target of creating 100 Tiny Forests. As of January 2025, all the grants are still being delivered with completion due in March 2025. As with TWIG, delivery of the outputs and outcomes from Coetiroedd Bach is ongoing and as such it is too soon to assess the outcomes and impacts achieved. Based on data provided by NRW, eight of the Coetiroedd Bach sites had outdoor learning spaces included within them, indicating their potential to support education and learning outcomes.

Table 3.2 Profile of Coetiroedd Bach grants

Round	Total grants	Total sites	Grant Award
Round 1	0	0	£0
Round 2	3	9	£349,930
Round 3	11	15	£497,676
Total	**14**	**24**	**£847,606**

Source: National Lottery Heritage Fund

Table 3.3 below sets out the distribution of Tiny Forest sites across Wales, showing that the Vale of Glamorgan has the most Tiny Forest sites with three, followed by Cardiff and Powys and who have two sites. This suggests that Tiny Forest sites are not evenly distributed across Wales, with Mid and South East Wales more prominently represented.

[8] Citizen science involves volunteers working with scientists and conservationists to collect and analyse data to support efforts to monitor changes in habitats and species.

Table 3.3 Number of Tiny Forest grants and sites by local authority area

Local authority	Total grants	Total sites
Vale of Glamorgan	3	3
Powys	2	3
Cardiff	2	6
Wrexham	1	4
Monmouthshire	1	1
Bridgend	1	2
Caerphilly	1	1
Flintshire	1	1
Newport	1	2
Torfaen	1	1
Total	**14**	**24**

Source: WLO Team, NRW

Survey responses were received from eight of the 14 grantees in receipt of Coetiroedd Bach funding. When asked how effective the Earthwatch training was, six organisations that received Coetiroedd Bach funding responded. Most organisations (4 out of 6) reported that they found the training effective. The remaining two organisations reported that the support was neither effective nor ineffective. No organisation reported the training to be ineffective. This suggests that the initial Earthwatch training was generally received positively.

However, there were mixed views regarding levels of satisfaction with the ongoing support sites received from Earthwatch. Of the seven organisations who responded to the question on the ongoing Earthwatch support, three organisations were satisfied with the ongoing support,

> 'The Tiny Forest grant allowed us to plant more trees and has given us more of a community focus. [Earthwatch] gave my tree planting plan more of a structure, more education and training and more community involvement.' (Follow-up interview)

Two of the seven organisations said they were dissatisfied with the ongoing Earthwatch support and one provided a neutral response and one reported that they 'didn't know'.

> '[The Earthwatch support] was useful if a bit drawn out. The support from then since has been poor, very limited response to any emails. The preparation seems very arduous, and silly to buy tools we will only use the once. Putting the bid together is difficult as you have to cost for certain materials, but this can change once you analyse the site characteristics, altering the costs associated.' (Survey respondent)

It is not possible to draw any further conclusions around the ongoing support provided to Coetiroedd Bach grant recipients given the small number of survey responses received. Understanding the level of ongoing support needs for grant recipients is an area that could be potentially picked up via the networking activities established within the National Forest programme. In the view of the evaluation team, the adoption of a citizen science approach within the Coetiroedd Bach sites and monitoring methodology established by Earthwatch, can also provide transferable lessons to other sites that have joined the Status Scheme on

how to involve local communities in the collection and analysis of data on habitats and species.

Four of the seven organisations that had secured Coetiroedd Bach funding stated in their survey response that they had faced challenges in creating or maintaining their Tiny Forest. Responses were unique to each site across the four organisations and included cost challenges in creating accessible pathways, being able to source the right trees and soil conditioner, protecting the site from damage caused by rabbits and securing sign-off from the local authority as landowner of the school site.

In summary, whilst the number of Coetiroedd Bach grants awarded is likely to fall short of the target of creating 100 Tiny Forests, this delivery mechanism of the National Forest for Wales has helped establish a small number of new woodland sites within urban and peri-urban spaces. Due to their urban or peri-urban location, these sites provide opportunities for access by communities living within or near the areas of these sites. . Further work on the ground will be explored in Phase 2 of this evaluation as well as approaches to be able to assess future impact.

3.6. The National Forest Status Scheme

On 23rd June 2023, the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme was opened to enable non-WGWE woodlands to join the National Forest network. Applications are open to anyone who owns or has management control of woodland in Wales. There is no limit on the number of woodlands that can be awarded National Forest for Wales Status, which is consistent with the aspiration to organically grow the network over a period of decades.

To be considered to join the scheme, applicants must show how their site meets the one essential National Forest Outcome – Good quality, well designed and managed resilient woodlands. They do this by demonstrating how they meet this outcome in their application form and the provision of supporting evidence in the form of a woodland management plan which is guided by the UK Forestry Standard (UKFS). Applicants are also encouraged to meet as many of the five desirable outcomes as possible also. Status is voluntary and sites have the option to leave the Scheme at any point.

Based on survey responses and in-depth interviews, whilst some sites may be ready to apply to the National Forest Status Scheme without additional support, the WLO team has played a key role in supporting other sites, helping to facilitate their applications. The value of WLO team support is explored further in Section 3.11. Funding available through TWIG has also been used to support some sites in meeting the mandatory outcomes set out in the scheme guidance.

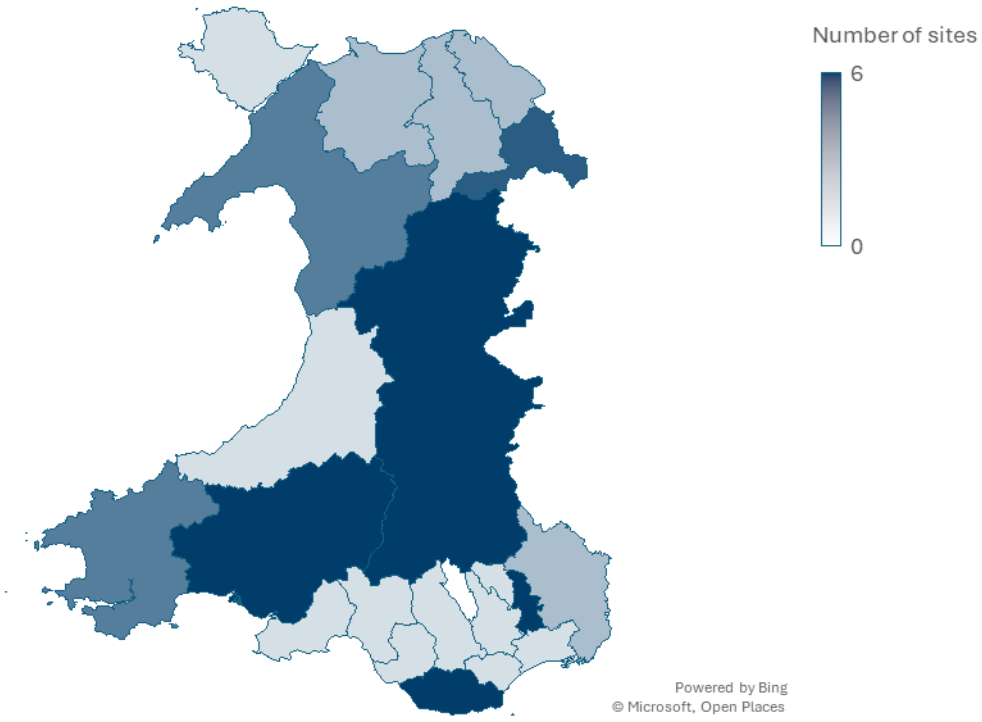
Two landowners who participated in the survey and the in-depth interviews reported having only recently taken over the management of woodland sites and are taking stock and reviewing their needs prior to committing to working towards the Status Scheme. This highlights the role of the WLO team in maintaining links with landowners of sites that are considering their options and who may apply to join the network in future.

> ‘The management of the woodland is a new undertaking; we may apply in the future once our understanding of the site's biodiversity and strategic goals for the site are established. (Survey respondent)

3.7. Profile of the National Forest network

As of January 2025, the National Forest comprises 26 WGWE blocks, which contain multiple sites managed by NRW, and 55 are managed by other landowners (Status Scheme sites). [footnotes 9 10] Figure 3.1 below shows the distribution of current National Forest for Wales Status Scheme sites.

Figure 3.1 Number of Status Scheme sites by local authority area



Description of figure 3.1: Map showing the number of Status Scheme sites by local authority area. Torfaen, The Vale of Glamorgan, Carmarthenshire have the highest number of sites with 6.

Source: WLO Team, NRW

Whilst the National Forest for Wales programme operates across Wales, it intends to ensure a geographic spread of sites throughout the country. However, at present, the local authority areas Powys, Torfaen, The Vale of Glamorgan, Carmarthenshire currently account for the highest number of Status Scheme sites at 6 each. Merthyr Tydfil is the only local authority area that at the time of writing does do not have any Status Scheme sites. Whilst this may suggest some concentration of sites in certain areas, it also indicates that the programme has managed to establish sites across a broad range of local authorities throughout Wales.

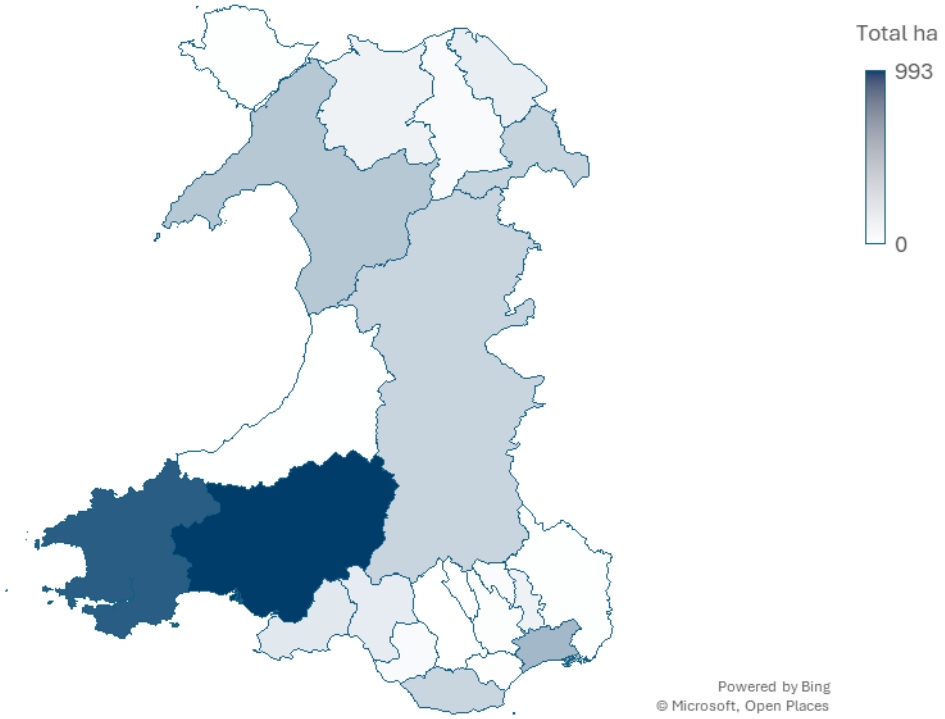
Footnotes

[9] Data provided by WLO team and accurate as of 7th October 2024.

[10] Full list of National Forest for Wales sites

The Status Scheme sites currently cover an area of 3,638 hectares. The local authority areas of Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire account for the largest proportion of total hectares at 993 hectares (27% of all Status Scheme sites) and 828 hectares (23% of all Status Scheme sites) respectively. Figure 3.2 shows the total hectares covered by Status Scheme sites by local authority area. It should be noted that the Figure does not show the distribution of the WGWE sites, which would present a different distribution.

Figure 3.2 Hectares of Status Scheme sites by local authority area



Description of figure 3.2: Map showing total hectares of Status Scheme sites by local authority. Carmarthenshire (993 ha) and Pembrokeshire (828 ha) have the largest areas, followed by Newport with 359 hectares.

Source: WLO Team, NRW

Analysis of the organisation/landowner type of Status Scheme sites shows that as of January 2025, local authorities account for 18% of total sites and private owners for 15% of sites. A full breakdown of sites by organisation/landowner type is presented in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4 Distribution of Status Scheme sites by landowner type

Landowner type	Total sites	% of Status Scheme sites
Local Authority	10	18%
Private owner	8	15%
Charity	7	13%
Woodland Trust	5	9%
CIC	5	9%
Community / Town Council	4	7%
Housing Association	4	7%
National Trust	3	5%
Community group	3	5%
DWR Cymru	3	5%
National Park Authority	2	4%
Wildlife Trust	1	2%

Source: WLO Team, NRW

The wider WLO database, which covers sites that the team are working with and supporting but who have not yet applied for or secured status, records details of 235 sites covering a total of 72,858 hectares. This provides an indication of the potential pipeline of sites that may apply for and join the Status Scheme in the future, which would contribute towards its continued growth and diversity.

3.8. Application and assessment process

The application and assessment process for the Status Scheme has been designed to be a non-bureaucratic, accessible to all and non-onerous or over burdensome on woodland owners seeking to apply.

In their application forms, applicants are required to submit response statements demonstrating how they will deliver against the essential National Forest outcome of creating high-quality, well-designed, and well-managed resilient woodlands. As part of their response, to evidence this outcome all applicants must submit a management plan for their site, outlining how they will meet the required outcome. Applicants may also choose to provide response statements for how they address additional desirable National Forest outcomes.

Feedback through interviews with the WLO team has highlighted that the focus has been on quality of sites not quantity. In this regard, the WLO team have played a role in the pre application stage to ensure that submissions are of a suitable quality to be approved.

No concerns about the quality of the application and assessment process were raised by stakeholders from the Welsh Government or Fund Managers. Additionally, applications are peer-reviewed by another member of the WLO team, further strengthening the robustness of the assessment process.

The WLO team were generally content with the application and assessment process. The only minor reservation related to their confidence and comfort in assessing the management

plans submitted by applicants. Two WLOs suggested that it could sometimes be challenging for them to determine whether a management plan clearly demonstrated how the site would meet the essential National Forest Outcome of being a good quality, well designed and managed resilient woodland. A review of the first 37 application forms submitted for the National Forest Status Scheme shows that applicants reference their management plan in their application form question responses, which requires the WLO to review the management plan as part of the assessment process. It is recognised that this is a qualitative, subjective assessment process and all applications and National Forest sites are very different so will be meeting the outcomes in different ways. This is also a new unique, initiative and practices are still developing. Additional training may help the WLOs to feel confident with their professional judgements made in assessing the application forms.

In practice, the WLO team review the management plans submitted by applicants using the list of required content outlined in the guidance on how to complete the application form. This list is guided by the UK Forestry Standard and allows the WLOs to determine whether the required content is evident within the submitted management plan.

So far, three sites that applied for National Forest Status were not recommended for approval following their initial application. [footnote 11] Applications are assessed by the WLO that has been liaising with the prospective and then peer reviewed by another member of the team. Where disparity exists between the lead officer and peer reviewer, the Team leader and where necessary the Welsh Government programme manager, make the final call on the recommendation/action to be taken.

From the perspective of the evaluation team, the detail included within the management plans submitted and accepted for those joining the Status Scheme forms part of evidence that could be used to monitor sites ongoing progress. Whilst this is not currently part of the role of the WLO team, Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales should consider whether there are ways to strengthen the assessment process to better support the long-term delivery of the programme.

From an applicant perspective, experiences of applying to the Status Scheme were positive. Some 29 out of 33 scheme members reflected on their application experiences in their survey response, with over two-thirds (21) of these indicating that the process was either very or quite clear and straightforward. Feedback on WLO support is covered in Section 3.11, including applicants' views on the support received from WLOs in preparing and submitting their Status Scheme application.

Eight Status Scheme members felt that the application process was either quite or very unclear and challenging (8 responses out of 29). Three of these 8 respondents reported that it was unclear what was required in order to answer the application questions or that the process required a lot of background information to be reviewed by applicants prior to submission. Five out of eight respondents additionally reported that the application form was lengthy and/ or complicated and took a long time to complete. Suggested areas for improvement provided by 31 survey respondents (out of 46) and through follow-up

[11] It is important to note that in some cases, application award dates have been delayed to give applicants time to make necessary changes to their applications or to complete required actions at their sites to meet the necessary criteria.

interviews undertaken during site visits included simplifying the application process, e.g. by streamlining questions in order to avoid perceived overlap. Additionally, four status scheme members recommended providing clearer guidance or templates for preparing management plans.

3.9. Contribution to National Forest Outcomes

Assessment of the applications submitted to achieve National Forest Status Scheme demonstrates the extent to which each site meets each of the National Forest outcomes. Please note that the first outcome 'Good quality, well designed and managed resilient woodlands' is the only mandatory outcome. As presented in Table 3.5 below, 93% of the 55 sites meet all non-mandatory outcomes, while all other sites meet five of the six non-mandatory outcomes. This suggests that most sites applying to the National Forest Status Scheme are already delivering a wide range of positive environmental and social impacts. Additionally, since most sites have demonstrated that they meet all of the National Forest Outcomes, it may be worth considering whether more of these outcomes should be made mandatory in future iterations of the scheme.

Table 3.5 Applications assessed contribution to National Forest Outcomes

Outcome area	No. of sites meeting outcome	% of all sites (n=55)	No. of sites not meeting outcome	% of all sites (n=55)
Good quality, well designed and managed resilient woodlands	55	100%	0	0%
Woodlands accessible to people	54	98%	1	2%
Community involvement in woodlands	54	98%	1	2%
Dynamic, multi-purpose woodlands and trees	55	100%	0	0%
Connected Woodlands	55	100%	0	0%
Woodlands that demonstrate learning, research and innovation	53	96%	2	4%

Source: WLO Team, NRW

Woodlands that demonstrate learning, research and innovation was the outcome with the most sites having been assessed as not being met. However this was still a small number – two sites had not met this outcome.

A detailed review of 37 application forms submitted by sites for the Status Scheme provides useful insight into the current status of the woodlands and ambitions for each site as reported by applicants in the 'Other Evidence' section of the application form. [footnote 12] Progress against achieving these ambitions should be monitored via future data capture work.

For example, with regards to access, most of the 37 applications demonstrate clear activities relating to improving physical access to sites as well as creating new trails and routes within sites to improve visitor experience, facilities, interpretation and signage, and safety. This includes work to develop self-guided trails and to formalise paths and routes to aid efforts to protect habitats including areas of new tree planting. As evident in the case study site visits, several sites have undertaken works to install routes and trails that are accessible for visitors with limited or impaired mobility.

Based on application responses a majority of Status Scheme sites (28 out of 37 sites) are supported by a regular volunteer and/or a 'friends of' group. Just under a quarter (8 sites) have paid staff managing the site such as a Ranger service or contractors. Two thirds (25 sites) host schools or youth groups and one third (13 sites) run open days which accommodate activities such as tree planting. Only a small proportion (4 sites) reported to have limited community involvement with 3 of these referencing the adoption of the principle of minimum interference.

What this demonstrates is the range of positive activities that sites are delivering or planning to deliver to engage and involve their local communities in woodlands. However, in the absence of a system for capturing regular monitoring data from the Status Scheme sites, it is not possible to draw together evidence on the activities delivered across the network and assess how these are continuing to contribute to the National Forest for Wales outcomes post-application. This point is explored further in the next section of this report.

When asked to articulate their long-term plan or ambition for their site, around a third (12 sites) of applicants referenced tree planting or woodland creation and just over a quarter (10 sites) referred to woodland restoration. This does suggest the potential contribution that sites may make in the future to woodland creation and tree planting targets and increasing biodiversity and ecosystem resilience through restoration.

When asked what they were most proud of and excited about in relation to their site, the most common responses related to the opportunity to engage and work with local schools and community groups (25 sites), enhancing the biodiversity of their site (17 sites) and the creation of specific wildlife areas within their woodland (17 sites).

In-depth interviews completed with a sample of 13 sites as well as the 6 site visits conducted by the evaluation team further elaborated on many of the themes evident within the applications to join the Status Scheme. Just over half of sites (7 out of 13) reported being particularly interested in improving access to and accessibility within the site as well as facilitating people's connection with nature. When asked about their ambitions for their

Footnotes

[12] Please note that Table 3.5 details assessment data provided by the WLO team. The 37 application forms referenced here refer to the anonymised application forms supplied to the evaluation team in November 2024. Detail on this data collection is provided within the methodology section of this report.

site, three of the 13 landowners actively referenced increasing biodiversity and introducing native species. All sites welcomed the 'kudos' and recognition that the status afforded both their woodland and their organisation's role in managing it.

Collectively the application forms highlight the contribution that the status scheme sites are making not only to the National Forest Outcomes but also to outcomes relating to education, skills development, physical activity, health and wellbeing, biodiversity, and the visitor economy.

3.10. Marketing and promotion

One of the findings from the evaluation of the National Forest Demonstrators Scheme was that there was more work to do to engage the wider public in the National Forest programme, including ensuring a focus on engaging diverse communities (Falzon, Tanner and Welford, 2022).

There was consensus amongst most stakeholders engaged through interviews for this evaluation, that since 2022 the National Forest had not been fully promoted and marketed. [footnote 13] There is no dedicated National Forest website to act as a platform to engage and inform prospective users and members of the public. Information is however hosted by the Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales, which includes case studies of a number of sites and details of the Status Scheme. Some promotion has also been provided via Welsh Government Social Media and through Visit Wales, which also includes case studies and details of some National Forest sites. [footnotes 14]

A minority of interviewed stakeholders reported that whilst this has developed marketing materials for prospective visitors and tourists, it is likely that greater promotion is required under a 'National Forest' brand to ensure that there is a unified and clear understanding of what the National Forest is. This was a view shared by five of the organisations/sites interviewed who were supported by the WLO team, including those already a member of the Status Scheme and those being supported to join the network.

Evidence from the most recent Public Opinion of Forestry Survey from 2023 indicated that 20% of those surveyed in Wales were aware of plans for a new National Forest in Wales, a statistically significant increase from 12% in the 2021 survey (Forest Research, 2023).[footnote 15] However, the most recent Public Opinion of Forestry Survey was conducted in early 2023, a few months after the WLO team was in place in September 2022 and prior to the launch of the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme.

Analysis of the evaluation survey, completed by participants in the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme sites and recipients of TWIG or Coedtiroedd Bach support, shows varied awareness of the National Forest programme. Whilst the majority of respondents (31 out of 44) had heard about the National Forest before any contact from the WLO team, around one third (13) had not. This suggests that not all landowners are aware of the programme,

Footnotes

[13] As highlighted in the methodology, stakeholders include Welsh Government staff and staff form organisations delivering the support mechanisms for the National Forest for Wales.

[14] Introducing the National Forest for Wales

[15] Survey data based on interviews with 1,047

highlighting an ongoing role for the WLO team in promoting the National Forest for Wales and the Status Scheme.

Whilst all sites receive branding guidelines as part of their welcome pack upon joining the Status Scheme, signage must be actively ordered, and not all sites have chosen to do so. Of the 13 sites that participated in an in-depth interview, three had not yet ordered or received branded signage at the time of the fieldwork. However, for those that had received and used the signage, it was well received and supported their efforts to raise the profile of their site within their community.

> 'I've had a few comments how good [the signage] is … that's been great and we've taken pictures to send to people.' (Follow-up interview)

Four sites have actively promoted the National Forest Status Scheme via their social media channels, which can contribute to raising awareness of the programme within their respective communities. A small number of sites (two) have been more measured in their approach to promoting their success in joining the Status Scheme due to a desire to manage visitor numbers (adopting the principle of minimum interference).

> 'Main aim is natural preservation and conservation of the site and allowing natural processes to allow the Forest to recover. We allow public access to the Forest but do not encourage or promote it in anyway as too many visitors will disrupt the natural eco-system.' (Follow-up interview)

This suggests the need for careful consideration in any future promotion and marketing of the National Forest network. In the view of the evaluation team the timelines for any national campaign or focused marketing activity should be cognisant of the fact that some sites that are members of the Status Scheme are still delivering TWIG funded activities and may wish to await completion prior to driving any growth in visitor numbers to their woodland site. Any nationally focused marketing activity will also need to recognise those sites that are seeking to carefully manage visitor numbers or are adopting the principle of minimum interference.

In-depth interviews with four of the 13 of the organisations/sites engaged or supported by the WLO team identified a desire for sites to receive further guidance, support, or funding to assist them in promoting and increasing engagement with their woodland site.

> 'It would be nice if part of having the National Forest status would include some exclusive promotional stuff. We would then get promoted as a site on other platforms that we wouldn't normally have access to, which would hit other circles and other reach. So that'll be one of the main things for us.' (Follow-up interview)

> 'What we were hoping for is sort of getting more in the public eye, by being part of the scheme we'd be promoted in avenues of marketing and in education and just exposure really that we would normally get access to. So that was one of the main things for us is that being part of this network of Forests across Wales, that it will become a recognised thing like the National Trust.' (Follow-up interview)

Sites that have joined the Status Scheme are provided a range of resources to support them in promoting their site and the wider National Forest for Wales programme. This includes a Stakeholder Toolkit, Brand Guidelines and information about how to register their site with Visit Wales (should they wish).

Two sites responding to the survey question about what further support they would like to see as part of their membership of the Status Scheme, suggested that it would be beneficial for sites to be informed in advance of any plans for marketing the National Forest for Wales programme and activities to increase public awareness of member sites.

In the view of the evaluation team, without suitable resourcing and a clear plan for promotion, the National Forest network sites that are publicly accessible may not achieve its potential in driving visitor numbers and supporting the visitor economy, recognising this is not the only focus of the NFfW and Woodlands Accessible to people and Community Involvement are not essential Outcomes that sites have to meet.

Several stakeholders, including those from Welsh Government, Fund Managers, members of the WLO team, advocated for the creation of an interactive map that enables the location, key features and 'offer' of each site to be clearly marked.

In the view of the evaluation team, future marketing and promotion activity also needs to consider the capacity of the WLO team to respond to prospective landowners. Without careful management there is a risk that the team would not have the resource to deal with an increase in the number of enquiries and requests for support. This points to a need to consider what approach should be taken for future engagement by WLOs should there be resource issues. For instance, a more targeted 'landscape approach' potentially prioritising WLO engagement efforts with specific landowner types or in geographically areas that are currently underrepresented on the Status Scheme could be undertaken.

3.11. Woodland Liaison Team

In March 2023, the Welsh Government announced the National Forest Wales Woodland Liaison Officers (WLOs) based in NRW. [footnote 16] There are six WLOs based in each of the Area Statement regions [footnote 17] and one WLO team leader. Their role is ongoing to support woodland owners to create and enhance woodland sites and signpost to relevant schemes. The WLOs offer support with applications for TWIG and Coetiroedd Bach as well as for applications to the Status Scheme.

The key aims for the WLO team, as set out in the grant agreement between Welsh Government and NRW, are for the team to contribute to the recommendations made by the trees and timber deep dive published in 2021 (Trees and Timber Taskforce, 2021), namely:

- NRW to work with communities and businesses to identify sites for 30 new National Forest woodlands.
- NRW to increase engagement with farmers, landowners, and communities to encourage and co-ordinate tree planting, and publish user friendly guidance on a Woodland Creation Hub.

Footnotes

[16] Please note that the WLO team was first formed in September 2022, with all team members recruited by January 2023.

[17] The Area Statement Regions cover the following areas in Wales: South East, South Central, South West, Mid Wales, North East, North West.

- Fund regional community woodland officers to help community groups navigate interactions with NRW and local authorities, and plan for longer-term resource to sustain woodland created. [footnote18]

Nearly all survey respondents that received TWIG funding and received support from the WLO on their TWIG application indicated that the support they received was effective (18 out of 20 survey respondents). A similarly positive response was reported by those that received WLO support when applying for Coetiroedd Bach funding (6 out of 7 survey respondents rated the WLO as effective). This suggests that the WLO team have provided valuable advice and guidance on the application process.

> '[The WLO] was very informative about the process and application itself. [Their] advice was essential in answering the questions effectively and efficiently. Always available for help and updates from application to completion.' (Survey respondent)

Responses cited the approachability and knowledge of the WLO team and the value of individual WLOs spending time on site and building a positive rapport with staff and/or volunteers. Qualitative interviews with three sites emphasised the value of the WLO team in supporting sites to apply for TWIG funding as part of their journey to join the Status Scheme:

> 'If it hadn't been for some professional help and advice, we would never have done it. [The WLO] was super helpful and patient and encouraging.' (Survey respondent)

> 'They've been really good. I think they provide a very good service, we've had them out a couple of times and when we were going through the process of the application, they were very good.' (Follow-up interview)

> 'The Woodland Liaison officer was very knowledgeable and approachable, but the scheme isn't appropriate at this time. We had a very positive conversation with the WLO and would not hesitate to contact them again in the future.' (Follow-up interview)

Given the likely growth in the number of sites securing Scheme Status, it will be important to review the capacity requirements and travel time associated with in-person engagement at sites given the importance attached to them by scheme members.

Just over half (21 out of 31 survey respondents) indicated that they had already applied for and achieved National Forest Status and one site had applied but was awaiting on the result of their application. For those who had not applied, 7 out of 16 survey respondents were planning to apply in the future and the same proportion (7 survey respondents) indicated that they were working towards being able to apply. The remaining two respondents reported that they had no plans to apply for National Forest status in the future.

Footnotes

[18] Please note that these aims are currently under review by Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales.

Drawing on the responses to the online survey of sites, 14 of the 16 sites who had not yet applied for the Status Scheme expressed the intention to do so. This suggests a relatively high conversation rate for sites that the WLO team are working with. This provides evidence that the WLO team are supporting and encouraging sites to apply to the Status Scheme and join the National Forest network.

Feedback from the WLO team suggests that landowners can commonly struggle to differentiate between the National Forest Status Scheme and SFS or the Woodland Creation scheme. The branding of the MTOF programme, which was supported through a high-profile national campaign, as part of the National Forest programme has also created some confusion from landowners in particular because this included the National Forest logo. As such, they have provided a resource to speak with landowners to aid them in navigating the various programmes and options, the aims of the National Forest and the objectives of the Status Scheme as well as referring on to other schemes such as woodland creation.

If WLOs continue to provide a wide range of support to Status Scheme sites and sites that are not yet members of the scheme, it is possible that their workload could increase. This raises questions regarding the capacity of the WLO team to continue their role in supporting prospective applicants, whilst at the same time assessing applications received and working with existing members to support them in realising their ambitions for their sites.

Within evaluation interviews, this issue was raised by several stakeholders (three) across Welsh Government and the WLO team who acknowledged the increasing caseload of the WLOs because of the growing interest in joining the National Forest network and growth in the Status Scheme membership. In the view of the evaluation team this requires action to model future resourcing needs aligned to future growth and management of the National Forest network.

Any consideration of future resources should consider the geographical distribution of prospective, potential, or key sites as well as the travel burden on the WLO team given the value and emphasis on on-site work. In practice, this may mean that more resource may be required in some Area Statement regions than others from 2025 onwards.

A further theme raised during interviews with Welsh Government and NRW stakeholders and the WLO team themselves was a need to consider a more targeted approach to engage specific profiles of landowner. A more targeted model of recruiting sites to the programme is planned once the network has been established. Specifically, moving to a landscape approach to address any geographical gaps in the National Forest network, for example.

The WLO team reported that to date they have exercised caution in engaging farmers due to sensitivities around the SFS, which has contributed to the current profile of sites that the team have worked or are working with. Interviews with the WLO team highlighted that there have also been challenges associated with engaging and encouraging some local authorities to consider joining the Status Scheme due to their budgetary pressures and limited resources to support woodland management.

Feedback from WLOs suggested that the most cited barrier to recruiting new sites is the requirement to have a Woodland Management Plan, in particular for smaller woodland

owners who may not have the resources to produce one. This is described by a survey respondent not on the Status Scheme:

> ‘We need financial support for a detailed ecological survey so we can create an appropriate management plan. We need funding then to carry out the management plan create a healthy sustainable forest.’ (Survey respondent)

This does emphasise the important role of TWIG (or a comparable grant scheme) in facilitating progression towards applying to the Status Scheme as the funding allows for revenue funding to be used to support the preparation of a long-term management plan for woodland sites.

However, feedback from the WLO team also highlighted that the absence of succession or continuation funding to implement management plans could also dissuade some landowners from applying. Generally, the WLOs fed back that smaller landowners often needed more support than landowners with larger sites.

3.12. Networking and sharing learning

To facilitate sharing and learning NRW has established the National Forest for Wales Network. This is a nationwide network, managed by the WLO team, comprising of members of the National Forest’s Status Scheme. The purpose of the Network is to help sites share/learn/collaborate and discuss subjects relevant to National Forest for Wales Members. The aims of the Network are to:

- Support sites in maintaining and enhancing their woodlands in line with the National Forest outcomes.
- Facilitate networking opportunities for sites to support and learn from each other.
- Support sites to foster and grow supportive relationships between themselves and identify/facilitate collaboration opportunities.
- Showcase site diversity, share best practice, challenges, and ways to overcome those and site challenges.
- Facilitate opportunities for learning by hearing from expert and guest speakers on relevant topics.
- Spread the word of the National Forest and help it grow. Encourage outreach from National Forest for Wales sites to engage other woodland managers and owners, fostering the growth of the network.

The Network is delivered via quarterly online meetings, focussed events, regional site visits (open days) and quarterly newsletters. [footnote 19]

All seven sites that were already members of the Status Scheme interviewed reported that they were involved in the National Forest for Wales Network. Feedback captured during case study site visits also highlighted that Status Scheme sites are actively involved in the

Footnotes

[19] The first newsletter was disseminated in August 2024.

networking meetings. Three out of seven landowners reported to have received invitations for meetings (online and on-site) but indicated that they struggled with capacity to attend.

> ‘I get an awful lot of invitations to do things. I’ve got to say that I just don't have capacity to particularly engage with it, so I've declined nearly every meeting.’ (Follow-up interview)

However, feedback from interviewees who had attended network meetings (four out of seven) highlighted that they are generally happy with the sessions and find them useful.

> ‘They've had some interesting speakers on, they're useful because it helps spread knowledge and it’s a networking facility which is good.’ (Follow-up interview)

> ‘I think it's really important to network with other people. Everyone is doing something slightly different. If you've got a problem, then it's likely that someone else has the same problem and there's no point reinventing the wheel.’ (Follow-up interview)

Landowners welcomed the opportunity to meet other sites and build their links. Sites also valued the contact the network meetings gave them with the WLO team, which gave team access to advice, guidance, and support on a range of areas. Topics or themes for future Network meetings suggested by sites interviewed included:

- Courses or lessons on woodland management
- Introducing new wildlife to woodlands
- Encouraging biodiversity and natural processes
- How to work with NRW (e.g. securing permissions for certain activities)
- Funding support and options for Status Scheme sites.

As the network grows as more sites join the Status Scheme, it may be advantageous to establish sub-groups or communities of practice that cluster together sites with comparable characteristics and aspirations. Although attendance at the network meetings is not mandatory, given the geographic spread of Status Scheme sites, it can be difficult for members to attend in-person networking events hosted at specific sites that are a distance from their own site.

3.13. Welsh Language

As highlighted in Section 2, this evaluation seeks to explore the application and delivery experiences of organisations and individuals who have chosen to apply to funding schemes or the Status Scheme in Welsh. However, it is important to note that there is no Welsh language requirement for sites accessing any of the National Forest delivery mechanisms. The evaluation survey and in-depth interview responses reflect the views of the sites included in the sample, but these sites were not purposefully selected.

Survey responses did not provide any insight into the experiences of those that have chosen to apply to the funding schemes or the Status Scheme in Welsh. Only two organisations stated that they had applied to join the Status Scheme in Welsh and no challenges were reported. The Status Scheme Application Form does not currently require applicants to provide detail on how they plan to effectively engage Welsh Language

communities. This could be added to aid understanding of how sites plan to engage and involve this community.

Only one in-depth interview respondent commented on their experiences of involving Welsh language communities, indicating that to date they had not been particularly successful. [footnote 20] This was attributed by the interviewee to the fact that many people in their community are farmers and have their own land to manage so it can be challenging to encourage them to take part in open days or other community focused events.

> ‘We haven't been terribly successful in getting the Welsh speaking community along, I think it's because we're a very rural area…everything that we produce, we do have translated… we do have a few people who come, who are Welsh speaking, but mostly it's not, it's not the Welsh community.’ (Follow-up interview)

This is a view from one site and it’s unclear whether similar views are shared amongst other sites or if this is a consideration for them. Moving forward this could be an area of focus for the Network and potentially incorporated into any monitoring return or update for sites that have secured status.

3.14. Summary of what is working well and areas for improvement

Based on the fieldwork completed to date, the following summary is presented to highlight what has worked well and what could be improved regarding the delivery of the National Forest programme since 2022.

3.15. Worked well

Findings suggest that TWIG funding has played a valuable role in supporting the growth in the National Forest network. As well as encouraging and supporting sites to become ready to join the Status Scheme, it is also continuing to support sites that have already become members and in doing so aiding them in contributing towards the six high-level National Forest outcomes.

Whilst there are fewer Coetiroedd Bach grants than TWIG and delivery is likely to fall short of the target of 100 Tiny Forests, this delivery mechanism has helped establish a small number of new woodland sites within urban and peri-urban spaces.

A review of the first 37 application forms submitted for the National Forest Status Scheme suggests that around one third of sites have recently completed planting or are planning to create new woodland. This provides an indication that the network can and will contribute towards planting and woodland creation objectives even though this is not a mandatory requirement to join the Status Scheme

Positive feedback has been captured on the process of applying to the Status Scheme from those that responded to the survey, providing evidence that the application and assessment processes are clear and proportionate.

Footnotes

[20] Please note that all respondents who took part in in-depth interviews were asked whether they had looked to engage Welsh Language communities with site activity and to provide detail on their experiences.

For sites that have joined the National Forest Status Scheme, the support and advice provided from the WLO team was rated by most organisations as very effective. Nearly all survey respondents that received TWIG funding and Coetiroedd Bach funding indicated that the support they received from their WLO was effective, providing valuable advice and guidance on the application process and helping to ensure their submissions were aligned with the programme aims.

The WLO team are regarded as approachable and knowledgeable. They have also engaged with landowners and communities to develop a pipeline of sites that may join the Status Scheme in the future. In the view of the evaluation team, they are an integral and necessary part of the delivery of the programme.

Positive feedback has been received regarding the National Forest network, which is enabling sites to share knowledge, practice and learning. This aspect of delivery has real potential to support delivery against the six high level outcomes and achieve longer-term impacts for woodlands and communities by sharing learning on activities and management on Status Scheme sites.

3.16. Areas for improvement

A small number of stakeholders (3 of the 10 interviewees) reported being uncertain on whether the programme's primary focus is on supporting the visitor economy through the creation of a national trail, or on environmental objectives such as tree planting, improving biodiversity, and expanding woodlands, which align with the core aims of the Woodlands for Wales Strategy. Whilst there is a consensus of stakeholder support for the programme, it would be helpful for the concept, delivery approach and associated timelines to be restated and communicated to the key stakeholder organisations of Welsh Government, NLHF, Llais y Goedwig and Coed Cadw.

When applying for the Status Scheme, applicants are required to submit their management plan with their application. Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales should consider whether there are ways to strengthen the assessment process to better support the long-term delivery of the programme.

Whilst some promotional activity has been carried out, it would be helpful to produce a clear and well-resourced marketing and communication plan for the programme. This could include more support and guidance for Status Scheme sites, beyond their initial stakeholder pack of guidance, as well as promotion at a programme level.

A landscape approach is expected to help fill gaps in the network and guide the future focus of the WLO team. As the programme progresses, this approach will be further developed and clarified, including targeted efforts based on the profile of sites already within the Status Scheme. To maximise its effectiveness, it will be important to define how and why specific sites are selected, ensuring alignment with the existing network and programme goals.

4. Emerging Outcomes and Impacts

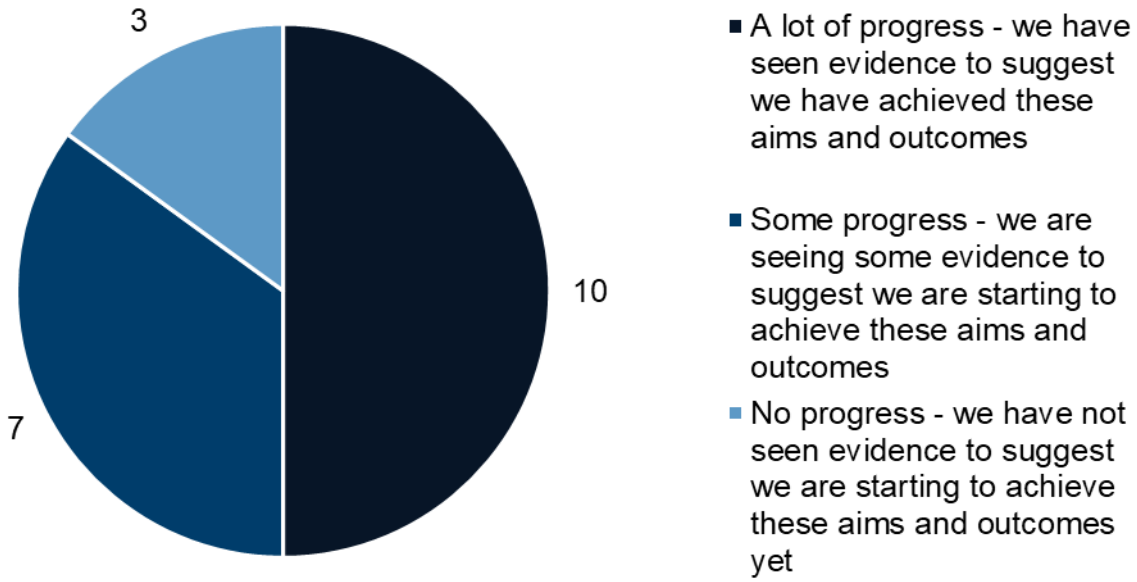
Whilst this report has predominantly focused on process aspects of the delivery of the National Forest programme over the period 2022-2024, fieldwork has identified some emerging themes in relation to the delivery of outcomes and longer-term impacts across the woodland sites. It is important to note that considerations of how to assess outcomes and impacts going forward will be considered in further detail in phase 2 of this evaluation.

4.1. National Forest for Wales outcomes

Survey respondents that had received a TWIG grant were asked to comment on the extent to which they have delivered against the National Forest for Wales outcomes. The main theme reported by all sites responding to the survey was that it was too early to evidence impacts across the National Forest for Wales outcomes.

However, half of sites (10 out of 20 TWIG sites surveyed) reported that they had made a lot of progress against the stated aims and objectives included in their TWIG application. Just over a third (7 out of 20 TWIG sites) that they had made some progress and 3 sites indicated that at the point of the survey they had made no progress which was largely due to administrative delays in securing sign-off to proceed with their grant funding (see Figure 4.1). [footnote 21]

Figure 4.1 Grant recipient progress against achieving TWIG outcomes



Description of figure 4.1: 10 grant recipients reported a lot of progress- we have seen evidence to suggested we have achieved these aims and outcomes. 7 grant recipients reported some progress- we are seeing some evidence to suggest we are starting to

[21] Survey respondents were not asked to comment on progress against each outcome but more broadly on progress against the outcomes referenced in their TWIG application. This includes the three essential outcomes: Good quality, well-designed and managed resilient woodlands; Woodlands accessible to people; and Community involvement in woodlands.

achieve these aims and outcomes. 3 grant recipients reported no progress- we have not seen evidence to suggest we are starting to achieve these aims and outcomes yet

Source: Wavehill survey of sites/ n= 20 TWIG recipients

Two sites that responded to the survey reported that the TWIG funding they received had improved the accessibility of their site, and contributed to the outcome for Woodlands accessible to people. [footnote 22] This role that TWIG has played in improving access is also demonstrated through the Status Scheme applications as well as through site visit discussions where sites reported using TWIG to improve access to physical sites through upgrading and improving existing paths or installing new paths and ramps, reinforcing perimeter fencing and restricting vehicle access to improve pedestrian safety.

Sites reflected that this this would help to drive progress against other high-level outcomes in the future. The value of TWIG funding is also articulated by six sites in their application to join the Status Scheme:

> ‘The TWIG project has allowed us to develop and grow a volunteer group in the local community, who we have been providing training in wildlife surveying to record our base-line data that have never been recorded before in these woodlands, especially towards our lower plant life and red list woodland bird species.’ (Status Scheme Application form)
>
> ‘The population around [the site] is small… this very rural area. To date we have not had any major push to involve the local community in helping to manage our woodlands, however the TWIG grant has allowed us to employ a dedicated Ranger to spend time building up those community links by reaching out to the residents of the village and to wider communities and groups to connect with us and help us deliver objectives such as replanting in some of our woodlands to help with the access improvements we are implementing.’ (Status Scheme Application form)

In-depth interviews with 7 sites that had joined the Status Scheme highlighted progress across several of the high-level outcomes, including improving connectivity between woodlands by working collaboratively with landowners for adjacent woodland sites, supporting improvements to the quality and management of the woodland site through remediation and conservation works and planting and involving communities through open days, volunteer days and the delivery of education and learning opportunities.

In their survey responses two of the ten sites that responded to the question highlighted unintended consequences from their TWIG funding, this related to increased support from their local authority for one and increased staff capacity pressures for the other.

Feedback captured and collated by the WLO team on the changes and outcomes achieved for sites that have secured TWIG funding includes:

Footnotes

[22] Please note that it has not yet been possible within fieldwork to determine whether sites have measured an increase in access to sites or increased accessibility of sites.

- Commissioning professional drone footage and filming to help promote the site to prospective visitors
- Increased visitor numbers
- Expansion to the visitor offer
- Introduction of a new ranger team
- Increased sense of pride and ownership amongst volunteers
- Launch of woodland enterprises and training opportunities for local people.

Most organisations (6/7) that secured Coetiroedd Bach funding who took part in in-depth interviews reported that that their site had either yet to be planted or was in the early stages of development.

4.2. Monitoring systems and processes

There is currently no programme level Theory of Change for the National Forest for Wales programme, albeit a model was created through the evaluation of the National Forest Demonstrators. Whilst it is possible to draw together detail on the activities and outputs supported by the development of the programme (e.g. number of applications for grant funding, grant awards, WLO meetings, network meetings), there are no agreed performance metrics (short-term outcomes) to ascertain the programme's continuing progress against the six high level outcomes established.

When asked how progress against the National Forest for Wales outcomes was being measured, survey responses were generally vague. Although sites joining the Status Scheme are required to submit their management plans, there is currently no standard format for these. In the view of the evaluation team, it would be useful to conduct a thematic analysis of management plans across the Status Scheme sites to identify what monitoring processes, if any, are in place, what outcomes sites are working towards and whether these plans include information on the data routinely collected and the quality of this.

As highlighted in Table 3.6., most sites have been assessed through their application to currently contribute to all five non-mandatory National Forest outcomes. However, as sites on the Status Scheme are not required to submit any regular monitoring returns outlining progress against their vision and ambitions set out in their application form, there is no collated data or intelligence on how they will continue to meet the outcomes and the impact of site activity. To address this, the Welsh Government is producing a set of indicators to help measure how the National Forest for Wales is developing and whether it is meeting its objectives.[footnote 23] Sites may be asked for information on how their woodlands contribute to these indicators once they have been developed. This could support the existing 5-year check carried out with sites to ensure standards are maintained and the National Forest for Wales Outcomes are still met. Where sites are asked to provide additional information to support the measurement of progress of the National Forest for Wales, it is important that these measures are achievable and proportionate to the capacity of each site.

Footnotes

[23] National Forest for Wales: Status Scheme Guidance.

The Status Scheme application forms demonstrate considerable diversity and creativity in how sites are or plan to engage and involve local communities. This can be demonstrated in the extract below taken from an application submitted to join the network.

> ‘Our wooded spaces are enjoyed by many groups and categories of visitors, from casual customers of the visitor centre to organised school trips and local scout groups. The diverse nature of our visitors is also mirrored in the design and use of our woodland. [The site] currently hosts a wonderful story trail, populated with stunning wood carvings and whimsical story telling pathways that engage the visitor with a contemporary QR code led interactive story experience. Very popular with families, schools and scout groups alike. Many of our woodland margin areas house readymade picnic areas with forestry furniture and picnic tables made from recycled and repurpose materials, all in keeping with the site's unique ecological sensitivities.’ (Status Scheme Application form)

The lack of ongoing data capture after site applications presents a risk of inadequately evidencing the progress of individual sites and the programme as a whole against the six high-level outcomes, as well as its contribution to wider policy areas. This raises questions as to how NRW or Welsh Government would measure the overall contribution that the programme is making towards targets such as tree planting and woodland creation or objectives around engaging and involving local communities or providing opportunities for volunteering. At present there is no mechanism for this to be captured at a programme level.

The National Forest for Wales Status Scheme Guidance articulates the six outcomes but does not include any key performance indicators against which progress can be measured. It also does not explicitly reference the 23 Woodland for Wales indicators published in 2019. This identifies a need for clarity from Welsh Government on the expectations for National Forest Status Scheme sites to report their activity and progress towards outcomes. For example, the kind of evidence or progress Status Scheme sites should provide to maintain their status at the five-year check-in or retain their status at the ten-year point as outlined in the Status Scheme guidance could be clearer.

Stakeholder interviews highlighted a degree of uncertainty around the use and adoption of the Woodland for Wales Indicators as an approach to monitoring the progress of the programme in achieving the high-level outcomes set out in the Woodland for Wales Strategy.

The absence of any standardised indicators and regular monitoring process currently limits the ability to report on the contribution that the sites are collectively making towards a range of policy objectives and other measurements such as the national wellbeing indicators.

By way of example, there is no baseline position for sites individually or the network more broadly on visitor numbers or the profile of visitors. As such, it is not possible to determine if the National Forest programme is supporting growth in visitor numbers and for which communities.

Similarly there is no centralised data on the number of educational or learning opportunities delivered by the sites (including forest skills) or insight into the number of jobs, traineeships or volunteer opportunities enabled. A standardised set of data which detailed the number of

opportunities provided across sites would demonstrate the true value being delivered by a network of good quality, well designed and managed resilient woodlands.

The next phase of the evaluation will assess how comparable programmes across other UK nations approach the capture of key metrics to enable an assessment of impact. This may include the National Forest, Community Forest programme and Public Forest Estate in England and the Forestry Grant Scheme in Scotland.

The Community Forest Programme, which is managed by Community Forest Trust, have secured funding via Defra to capture data across the 15 sites and provide a data monitoring return to enable reporting against key targets and outcomes. The National Forest for Wales programme currently does not have a similar data return exercise established – therefore, it will be helpful to understand how this has worked in England and whether such an approach should be taken in Wales.

4.3. Changes in site management

Sites were asked whether applying and gaining National Forest Status has resulted in any change for their woodland. Sites responding to the survey and engaged through interviews stated that it was too early to say, although many sites reported that the TWIG and Coetiroedd Bach grant funding they had received had improved the accessibility of their site through the installation of new paths and trails and by clearance works.

Based on survey responses and in-depth interviews with a sample of sites, over half of survey respondents report not to have made any substantial changes in the way their woodland is managed. For example, 6 out of the 11 interviewees who responded to the prompt reported that the management of their woodland site had not changed much after applying for or gaining National Forest status. Given that being awarded status is a recognition that sites have been assessed as being well managed, it is not expected that sites would alter their management plans after joining the network. However, this is an area that may develop through knowledge exchange and shared learning facilitated through network meetings for sites on the Status Scheme.

> ‘I think we still have the same aims and goals that we had when we first took over the land. Obviously, it's helped us go in that direction, that we wanted to go anyway.’ (Follow-up interview)

Where changes to the management of sites was reported, examples included activity to strengthen or review the provision of learning and wellbeing opportunities.

> ‘It's delivered a lot of well-being for people because now it's easier to get around on the site, there's more information to absorb. There's a member of staff on site for a few hours so we can interact with people.’ (Supported stakeholder interview)

Two of out seven sites that had secured National Forest Status also indicated that they had or planned to actively seek out other sources of funding to support them in implementing the commitments outlined in their management plan.

Site visits undertaken by the evaluation team captured feedback from those managing woodland sites. Four sites indicated that their involvement in the National Forest for Wales

programme was helping them to achieve the goals outlined in their respective management plans at a faster rate.

Moving forward, assessing changes in site management could be an area that is documented via monitoring returns from Status Scheme sites and/or explored via network meetings.

4.4. Opportunities

Based on the fieldwork undertaken at this interim phase of the evaluation, the main opportunities for the programme identified relate to sharing of practice across sites, promoting sites (or selected sites) through a national marketing campaign and helping sites to better evidence both their progress towards or maintenance of the National Forest for Wales outcomes and wider national policy objectives.

Demonstrating the contribution that the sites are making to a range of national and local policy areas was also identified by stakeholders and sites as an opportunity, in particular if this helped with efforts to attract future investment to support the management and maintenance of woodland areas. In-depth interviews with 7 sites did highlight a level of confidence that their position on the Status Scheme would be beneficial in helping to secure future funding.

‘I could imagine if I needed to put in an application to lottery or nature networks fund or something, saying that it's been accredited as part of the National Forest Network would probably be a good thing so I'd imagine it would be useful, but I haven't needed to yet.’ (Supported stakeholder interview)

Evidence from one case study site visit highlights that sites are attracting investment through funding including UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UK SPF) to develop or upgrade visitor facilities, which in turn can support efforts both increase visitor numbers and engage a more diverse profile of visitors.

In the view of the evaluation team, this emphasises the importance of supporting sites to improve their monitoring processes to help them build their evidence base of progress towards the six high-level outcomes as well as wider policy objectives.

4.5. Barriers

Accessing adequate funding to implement the objectives and ambitions outlined in their management plan was one of the main barriers reported by landowners, highlighted within 5 of the 13 interviews in-depth interviews.

Across the National Forest Network, funding is accessed from a wide range of sources including via Welsh Water, NRW, local and town councils and Trusts and Foundations. Within in-depth interviews and survey responses many sites expressed a desire to identify opportunities to bring in additional funding, in particular revenue funding, to support efforts to deliver against the six National Forest for Wales outcomes and implement their management plans. This included sites that had secured either TWIG or Coetiroedd Bach funding and were in the process of applying to join the Status Scheme as well as those that were already members but were looking for additional funding to support them in achieving their ambitions.

Transport connections were cited as a barrier for woodlands located in rural areas to attracting and encouraging people to visit sites (two of 13 follow-up interviews). This is an area that may merit further exploration at a programme level as the number of sites within the programme grows.

5. Conclusions

This independent evaluation of the National Forest for Wales programme covers the period of delivery from late 2022 to late 2024. This Phase 1 report has focused on the delivery of the National Forest programme from 2022 onwards, including its delivery mechanisms, staff roles, funding and the National Forest Status Scheme which was launched in June 2023. Whilst some findings have been presented around emerging outcomes and impacts, these are provisional and will be explored in greater detail in the next phase of the evaluation.

The Welsh Government set out its commitment to create a National Forest for Wales in Spring 2020. The Programme for Government 2021 – 2026 continues this commitment to create a National Forest to extend from the North of Wales to the South.' The aim of the National Forest is to both protect existing woodland and connect them with new woodland areas through tree planting. It is also hoped that the network will contribute to efforts to boost tourism and support the visitor economy.

Whilst all stakeholders were supportive of the programme, a minority of stakeholders (3 of the 10 interviewees) were unclear whether the focus is on supporting the visitor economy through the creation of a national trail or on environmental objectives associated with tree planting and improving biodiversity.

To ensure shared understanding of the concept, it would be helpful for the concept, delivery approach and associated timelines to be restated and communicated to the key stakeholder organisations of Welsh Government, NLHF, Llais y Goedwig and Coed Cadw.

The evidence suggests that the delivery of the programme is progressing well and the various mechanisms are combining to support the growth of a network of woodland sites operating within the umbrella of the National Forest for Wales.

Since launch in 2022, £7.168m of TWIG funding has been awarded over five rounds to 41 sites across Wales. TWIG funding has been a useful tool in supporting and encouraging organisations to apply for and ultimately join the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme.

Findings suggest that TWIG funding has supported the growth in the National Forest network. Some 21 of the 41 sites that have secured TWIG funding have joined the Status Scheme. As well as encouraging and supporting sites to become ready to join the Status Scheme, it is also continuing to support sites that have already become members and in doing so aiding them in contributing towards the six high-level National Forest outcomes.

The Coetiroedd Bach grant funding, launched in April 2023, £0.847m has been awarded over three rounds to 14 grantees, with 24 sites across Wales. Whilst the number of Coetiroedd Bach grants is likely to fall short of the target of creating 100 Tiny Forests, this delivery mechanism has helped to establish a small number of new woodland sites within urban and peri-urban spaces.

As of January 2025 the National Forest comprises 26 WGWE blocks, which contain multiple sites managed by NRW, and 55 Status Scheme sites which have joined through the National Forest Status Scheme and are managed by other landowners. From sites that responded to the survey, positive feedback has been captured on the process of applying to

the Status Scheme, demonstrating that the application and assessment processes were viewed as straightforward.

For sites that have joined the Status Scheme, the support and advice provided from the WLO team was rated by most organisations as very effective. Nearly all survey respondents that received TWIG funding and Coetiroedd Bach funding also indicated that the support they received from their WLO was effective, providing valuable advice and guidance on the application process.

This likely growth of the sites within the Status Scheme raises questions regarding the capacity of the WLO team to both continue their role in supporting prospective applicants, whilst at the same time assessing applications received and working with existing members to support them in realising their ambitions for their sites. This suggests that a review of the parameters, role, and capacity of the WLO team would be beneficial to support the future delivery of the programme.

Positive feedback has been received regarding the National Forest network, which is enabling sites to share knowledge, practice, and learning. The opportunity for sites to learn from each other and incorporate best practice has real potential to help sites to understand how to most effectively deliver against the six high level outcomes and achieve longer-term impacts for woodlands and communities.

There are a small number of areas for improvement at this stage in the delivery of the programme. Mixed views have been captured regarding levels of satisfaction with the ongoing support grant recipients have received from Earthwatch for the Coetiroedd Bach funding – although the number of those receiving the funding and number who engaged in the survey is small. Options to improve this aspect of the programme should be explored.

The process for assessing Status Scheme applications is designed to be non-bureaucratic, accessible and non-onerous on woodland owners seeking to apply. The delivery of the programme is adhering to this design and the application and assessment process has been well received by applicants. Given that applicants are required to submit their management plan with their application, Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales should consider whether introducing a more robust assessment of management plans could better support the long-term delivery of the programme.

Some promotion has been carried out through Visit Wales. However, a minority of interviewed stakeholders noted that while marketing materials for prospective tourists have been developed, further promotion under a unified 'National Forest' brand may be necessary to ensure a clearer and more consistent understanding of what the National Forest represents. This could include support and guidance for Status Scheme sites as well as promotion at a programme level.

The intention to move towards a landscape approach in the delivery of the programme can identify gaps in the profile of the network to be addressed as well as directing the future focus of the WLO team.

Although it is too early to evidence outcomes across the sites within the network, there is currently no requirement for sites to provide any monitoring data to NRW. This limits the ability standardise, collate, and evidence outcomes across the network of sites.

This raises questions as to how the programme can demonstrate its maintenance of or progress towards the six high level outcomes or contribution to targets associated with tree planting and woodland creation or objectives around engaging and involving local communities or providing opportunities for volunteering.

The next phase of the evaluation will focus on exploring the views and experiences of members of the public with regards to the National Forest and National Forest sites and understanding the impact evaluation methodologies that could be used to evaluate the National Forest programme in the future.

6. Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided to inform what delivery of the National Forest for Wales programme should look like post-2025.

6.1. Recommendation 1

Welsh Government should provide clarification on the concept of the National Forest for Wales programme including the balance of expectations for sites within the network to contribute to the objectives set out in the Woodland for Wales Strategy. This may necessitate a rebalancing and refinement of the application and assessment process to determine the extent to which sites can contribute to agreed national outcomes and targets.

6.2. Recommendation 2

Without suitable resourcing and a clear plan for promotion the National Forest network may not achieve all its potential impacts. Welsh Government should establish a clear plan for promotion subject to the clarification around the concept of and objectives for the programme.

6.3. Recommendation 3

TWIG funding has been an important tool in supporting and encouraging organisations to apply for and ultimately join the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme. Options for continuing this grant fund should be explored and resources provided in line with the planned growth of the network.

6.4. Recommendation 4

To date, the role of the WLO team has predominantly focused on encouraging and supporting applications to the Status Scheme. NRW and Welsh Government should explore the future role and resourcing of the team including the balance between supporting prospective sites and supporting current sites. As the network grows, this may require further investment to expand the capacity of the team and discussion about the adoption of a more targeted approach to engaging key sites and landowners.

6.5. Recommendation 5

Welsh Government should consider whether requirements and assessment processes should be introduced for Status Scheme sites to report activity maintenance of and progress towards outcomes as a condition of retaining their status. The absence of any standardised indicators and regular monitoring process currently limits the ability to report on the contribution that the sites are collectively making towards a range of policy objectives and the national wellbeing indicators.

7. Annex A: Learning from the National Forest Demonstrator Scheme

To support the development of the National Forest, there have been a range of different mechanisms. Following the announcement of the National Forest, a demonstrator scheme was delivered in the 2020/21 financial year to test different funding and delivery mechanisms. Four different schemes were delivered:

- National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) Community Woodlands Scheme (this ran over two years whilst the schemes below were delivered over one year) Keep Wales Tidy (KWT)
    - Coetiroedd Bach (Tiny Forests)Tree planting in schools – delivered through the Eco-Schools Programme Natural Resources Wales (NRW) Enhancement scheme
    - Forestry Industry Recovery Scheme (FIRS)

The nature of each scheme varied and included grants for communities to plant or enhance tree management, woodland creation, funding to support the Welsh Government Woodland Estate (WGWE) and support for the forestry sector.

The evaluation of the National Forest Wales Demonstrators aimed to explore the following top-level objectives. Examine the effectiveness of different funding models and delivery approaches.

- To understand how best to involve diverse communities in creating the National Forest for Wales.
- To determine the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement and identify areas for improvement.
- Demonstrator projects created to test funding and delivery mechanisms and work towards achieving National Forest programme outcomes.

The main findings from the evaluation [footnote 24] are summarised below:

7.1. Effectiveness of scheme delivery

- Project managers were broadly positive about the support received from NLHF.
- Generally, the successful projects tended to be projects looking for funding, rather than those designed specifically for the Community Woodland fund.
- Potentially, more resource should be provided to support emerging new projects.
- The capital only funding was thought to be restrictive, particularly the inability to fund dedicated project manager/coordinator roles.
- Other challenges included difficulties in securing equipment, and a heavy administrative burden.

[24] Wavehill (2022) - ‘Evaluation of the National Forest Demonstrators (summary)’. Welsh Government. 12th January 2022.

7.2. Keep Wales Tidy, Tiny Forests and Tree Planting scheme

- Potential planting sites tended to be identified by KWT's community officers approaching project managers. Project managers had to sign an agreement to maintain each site after the one-year funding period was completed. This was deemed to represent a risk in terms of ongoing site management and maintenance.
- The set structure and design of the scheme was seen as an advantage by project managers, however some highlighted the demonstrator was not flexible to individual locations.
- This scheme had met several core objectives including: creating new areas of woodland to support greater biodiversity; making nature more accessible for people; and providing opportunities for learning.

7.3. NRW Enhancement scheme

- This scheme comprised two elements: conservation enhancement and access enhancement. Interviews with the scheme and project managers showed that this was a strong concept that was easy to sell to those preparing project proposals.
- Interviews with NRW project leaders suggested that for the NRW scheme, funds did not become available with sufficient notice and in some cases, this led to the projects being carried out not being optimal in terms of overall value, time, budget, and staff capacity.
- Financial management processes were regarded as being overly bureaucratic and it was difficult to transfer money between budget headings.
- Timing created an issue, both in terms of the timeframes for awarding money creating difficulties due to seasonal impacts, and the demonstrators being designed as short-term projects.
- In terms of delivery against objectives it was deemed too early in the scheme to identify whether the objectives of the scheme has been met.

7.4. Forest Industry Recovery scheme

- Many of the successful applicants were experienced in working with a range of community interests.
- Mixed views on whether the funding was straightforward to apply for.
- The majority of surveyed projects reported that their scheme ran within time despite external factors.
- In terms of delivery against key objectives it was felt by respondents that the FIRS scheme had contributed to biodiversity and ecosystem outcomes and social and educational outcomes.

7.5. Involving diverse communities

- The evidence across all the schemes was that there remains more work to do to engage the wider public in the National Forest programme, but that the focus on engaging diverse communities in the Community Woodlands, Tiny Forests, and Tree Planting schemes has encouraged greater focused engagement work.
- Tiny Forests specifically have highlighted examples of community engagement that have brought real benefits to these projects.
- Moving forward a specific focus on engaging diverse communities should be required of all project activities to continue to extend knowledge and understanding and engagement in the programme in the future.

The National Forest Demonstrators provided learning and has influenced aspects of the design and implementation of the National Forest for Wales programme since 2022.

8. Annex B: Case studies

8.1. National Forest for Wales Case Study 1- South East Area Statement Region

8.1.1. Site background

The site is a community woodland site spanning roughly 200 acres. Once an ancient woodland, the site was cleared to make way for coal mining and Ironworks during the industrial revolution. The majority of the modern woodland was planted in phases between 1985 and 1990 and is now owned by the local council and managed by a community interest company (CIC).

The CIC, incorporated in 2019, is made up of a dedicated group of local volunteers that manage the woodland and run a wide variety of community engagement activities throughout the year including a forest school built by the volunteers using wood from the site. The CIC adheres to an ethos of keeping as much work in-house as possible, training their volunteers to undertake management of the site and host engagement activities while moving towards the long-term goal of commercial self-sustainability for the woodland.

8.1.2. National Forest support received

The CIC that manages the site have received multiple support streams associated with the National Forest for Wales programme. Partnering with a large woodland organisation, the site became one of the largest stockists and distributors of trees for farmers, school and families wanting to plant a tree as part of the MTOF scheme. The site have also received a TWIG grant which has gone towards improving the physical accessibility of the woodland by making paths around the east of the woodland wheelchair accessible and reinforcing the perimeter of the site with fencing and stone walls to restrict motor vehicle access to the woodland, increasing pedestrian safety. Furthermore, the grant is funding the creation of a woodland management plan to support the sites application for National Forest status.

8.1.3. National Forest Status Scheme

After engaging with MTOF and the TWIG grant, the Woodland Liaison Officer assigned to the site signposted them to the National Forest status scheme. The volunteers that lead the CIC managing the site felt that the scheme's ethos aligned with many of the objectives they were already seeking to achieve, namely about increasing community engagement with the site and improving biodiversity and the long-term sustainability of the woodland.

The volunteers were very positive about the scheme's focus on woodland management, an aspect they feel has been lacking in previous support for the site. Volunteers also highlighted the opportunities that the scheme provides to join a wider woodland network and gain an independent 'seal of approval' which marks the quality of the woodland.

8.1.4. Ambitions for the future

Due to the large area covered by the site, the CIC have a wide range of ambitions for what the site can achieve in the future. Currently, volunteers are being trained to undertake a majority of the maintenance on the site as well as deliver biodiversity works (planting fruit trees, creating animal habitats) and engagement activities (such as forest schools, plant giveaways, cooking classes, holiday events). The longer-term aim for the site is to deliver these activities on greater scale in a commercial self-sustaining way, through renting the site for woodland training, or selling goods grown on the site such as food or firewood. The CIC feel that joining the National Forest for Wales programme will allow them to hit their goals at a much faster rate and ensure the site is thriving for future generations.

8.2. National Forest for Wales Case Study 2- South Central Area Statement Region

8.2.1. Site background

The site features over 100 acres of meadows, gardens and mature woodlands situated around a large country house within a historic estate. The site has been owned by the local authority for the past 30 years. In that time the house has been converted into a hotel and a visitor centre has been built for the park and woodland. Since 2015, the site has been managed by a cultural trust who have led on the work to bring the site into the National Forest for Wales status scheme.

The park is open to the public and consists of four separate woodlands. The site is managed by a team of rangers from the cultural trust and two large volunteer groups that undertake regular maintenance of the site through litter picking, planting, and pruning. The park runs a variety of engagement events for families and schools from a newly purpose build education and well-being centre. Through their engagement with the National Forest for Wales programme, the cultural trust are keen to improve the biodiversity of their woodlands, moving away from the four separate monoculture woodlands that the cultural trust inherited, and continue to improve the physical accessibility of the site by paving popular walking routes and maintaining boardwalks.

8.2.2. National Forest support received

The cultural trust received funding through the TWIG grant to add paving to the site, remove diseased trees and start construction of a second forest school building to help with school outreach. Staff for the cultural trust have attended National Forest network meetings to seek out good practice for woodland management.

8.2.3. National Forest Status Scheme

Prior to joining the National Forest for Wales programme, the cultural trust undertook work to remove the monoculture woodlands on the site by planting a more diverse range of trees as part of a wider push to improve how the site was managed. Rangers from the cultural trust felt that joining the National Forest status scheme was a natural step given its focus on management, biodiversity and community engagement, aspects which were at the core of the site’s Woodland Management plan.

The rangers were incredibly positive about the support they received from their assigned Woodland Liaison Officer, who aided them during their TWIG and National Forest status scheme application and continues to be a point of contact for any queries relating to the scheme and other potential sources of funding and support.

The cultural trust have only been part of the scheme for a short time and feel that most of the benefits of the accreditation are yet to come. Attending National Forest network events has allowed them to make connections with similar sites to share good practice as well as learn lessons from completely different woodlands such as commercial or agricultural sites across South Wales.

8.2.4. Ambitions for the future

The cultural trust hope that their National Forest status scheme accreditation will lead to a stronger profile for site which will allow them to engage new audiences and continue to educate generations about the woodland.

They also hope that accreditation will serve as a mark of quality when applying for funding in the future to continue managing and maintaining the park.

8.3. National Forest for Wales Case Study 3- South West Area Statement Region

8.3.1. Site background

The 250-hectare site is run by a not-for-profit Trust and registered charity that was formed in 2000 to protect, conserve, and restore the site: a listed historic landscape consisting of mixed woodland, two lakes, and seven miles of woodland walks. The site attracts around 150,000 visitors a year and has Green Flag Heritage Site accreditation, which recognises its commitment to preserving the historical significance of its green spaces whilst maintaining high standards of environmental quality and accessibility.

User groups include primary and secondary schools and alternative curriculum, and mental health groups. The Trust is supported by paid staff (permanent staff include the site manager, an education/engagement officer and newly recruited woodland manager) and around 120 volunteers.

The Trust relies heavily on volunteers and grant funding to continue to develop the site. They have a good relationship with the local authority, who lend machinery and donate materials in return for firewood for the council's firewood business. To support income generation the Trust recently received support from the WG, NLHF and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund for a visitor centre (which includes a café and toilets) and to restore the historic walled garden (an enclosed space for paid for events and training. The volunteers, from retirees to young professionals and academics from the local university, work across the site in numerous and varied roles (e.g. gardening, staffing the café, site maintenance, planting, construction, wildlife conservation). The Trust have received the Investing in Volunteers award and the Queen's Award for Volunteers. They feel they are reaching all parts of the community and that there is something for everyone.

8.3.2. National Forest support received

The Trust has received TWIG funding to improve access and develop a woodland management plan.

8.3.3. National Forest Status Scheme

The entire site is within the Status Scheme. The Trust is very enthusiastic about being part of the scheme and were keen to join for the marketing opportunities, the sharing of best practice and to be part of a network.

The site has recently erected the National Forest signage and hopes to promote the site through any wider marketing of the Status Scheme. The Trust are keen to take advantage of networking opportunities and would like to see the development of specialist sub-groups (e.g. on invasive species) for the sharing of best practice.

8.3.4. Ambitions for the future

The Trust has an ongoing programme of restoration, focusing on the vista viewpoints, walled garden, and arboretum, and hopes to start a tree nursery for specimen trees. TWIG has made ambitions to improve the woodland more achievable as they now have a woodland management plan: they are now in a position where they are about to recruit a woodland manager.

As part of the continuing development of the site, the Trust is keen to take advantage of networking opportunities. They are also looking do more work to enhance their nature habitats and aim to become part local resilient nature networks. They are looking to create more opportunities for people to interact with the site and hope that National Forest status will help with promoting it.

8.4. National Forest for Wales Case Study 4- Mid Wales Area Statement Region

8.4.1. Site background

The site is 40-acre nature reserve which comes under the umbrella of a charitable Trust established to address the national decline in wildlife habitat and biodiversity of farmland. The site is managed by a small team of staff and a board of voluntary trustees. The site includes eco accommodation and a tenanted farmhouse. They run courses and rent out space to various groups, including the local Forest School, Permaculture Group and WI, as well as for NHS Eco retreats.

Located in the dispersed, livestock farming landscape of rural West Wales, some three miles from a small university town, most of the site's regular visitors come from the surrounding villages. The site would like to expand its visitor profile, especially to reach more families and a wider demographic of local people.

The Trust has a small group of regular volunteers who take part in a variety of organised volunteer activities. A number of these have mental or physical health issues. They advertise volunteering opportunities on social media, website, through CAVO, by word of mouth.

8.4.2. National Forest support received

The Trust has successfully bid for two rounds of TWIG funding (Rounds 1 and 3). They used TWIG Round 1 funding to improve boardwalks, provide more seating, erect signs that had already been made by local groups, extend their pond dipping platform, undertake a woodland survey and woodland management plan, and to train people in coppicing using an area of woodland which will be included in the status scheme.

The Trust are using TWIG Round 3 to make more of the site accessible, by extending paths from the boardwalks (e.g. joining an existing boardwalk, via a ramp, to a path to the round house, so more people can take part in activities at the roundhouse).

Volunteers are clearing and laying the paths (constructed of square grids, infilled with gravel, which grass can grow through). The funding will also be used to improve shelter for the outdoor seating and firepit outside the roundhouse, and to update and revise the woodland management plan to include a 10-year work programme identifying what can be done by volunteers.

8.4.3. National Forest Status Scheme

The site considers that it fulfils all the Status Scheme criteria but has not yet joined. The plan is for woodland area to be included (just under half the site), and initial discussions have taken place with their WLO. The current priority for the site, however, is fulfilling their outcomes for the latest round of TWIG funding.

8.4.4. Ambitions for the future

Future plans for the site include continuing to improve accessibility and increasing visitor numbers. It is hoped that Status Scheme membership will help promote the site to a wider audience. The site aim to take part in the Management Plan training planned for early 2025 as part of the National Forest scheme, to enable them to complete their management plan for the woodland.

8.5. National Forest for Wales Case Study 5- North East Area Statement Region

8.5.1. Site background

The site is 2.4 ha woodland which sits in the heart of a larger woodland area. It is privately owned and was bought with the intention of restoring the site. The site demonstrates how small, privately-owned woodlands can make an important contribution to both woodland restoration and community engagement.

When first acquired by the current owner, the woodland was predominantly a beech plantation, planted over 200 years ago on an Ancient Woodland Site. The woodland was therefore a mono-species habitat, with tall beech trees and limited under-canopy. The vision for the site is to restore it to a native woodland through a programme of selective felling and halo thinning, replanting with broadleaved species and native shrubs.

The site also boasts standing and lying deadwood that supports a range of species and habitats. Although the site was visited in full-autumn colour, in the spring there is a range of ancient woodland indicator species including bluebells and wood anemone, which demonstrated to the owner the opportunity to restore the site to support a diversity of wildlife.

Whilst there are no public rights of way through the wood, there are footpaths that are well-used by locals. The owner has put in place a notice describing the restoration activity taking place in the site and noted having positive feedback from passing walkers.

The owner is highly supportive of getting the community involved in the woodland, with local community members and families invited to be involved with tree planting through an article in the local newspaper. A local conservation group were also invited to support with some planting, where the owner delivered an ancient tree workshop for the group, teaching them how to record ancient trees. The woodland owner also made a link with a local theatre company whose staff came to support with tree planting, who have now built an ongoing relationship with the local Wildlife Trust due to encouragement from site owner.

To facilitate this community engagement, the site has a small fire pit with a circle of stumps, as well as a post installed to encourage visitors to take photos of the site to contribute to its monitoring.

The woodland has also hosted a site visit for the Small Woods Association, and the owner works closely with the Coed Cadw, Llais y Goedwig and the local Wildlife Trust.

8.5.2. National Forest support received

The site received a range of whips (unbranched young tree seedlings) from the My Tree Our Forest (MTOF) scheme, run by the Coed Cadw and Llais y Goedwig, one of the National Forest support mechanisms. Once further matured, these will be used as part of the replanting activity.

> ‘For me the community and National Forest is all about making connections and getting people linked together.’

8.5.3. National Forest Status Scheme

The woodland became part of the National Forest in 2023, and the owner has erected the National Forest signage close to the footpath that passes through the site. The owner also received support from the Woodland Liaison Officer when applying for National Forest for Wales status. When asked about their motivation for joining the National Forest, the site owner said this was to connect with other woodlands who may be carrying out similar restoration activity and to make further connections.

> ‘I am one of very few sites restoring Beech Plantation so was looking for advice from others who have done similar and happy to share experiences with others planning the same.’ (Landowner)

8.5.4. Ambitions for the future

Their experience so far of the National Forest scheme had been positive, although it was noted to be early days so the full benefits of being involved had not yet materialised. Looking forward, the site would like to see more of a joined-up approach to the National Forest for Wales programme, in bringing in other organisations involved to support the site to realise its ambitions and potential.

8.6. National Forest for Wales Case Study 6- North West Area Statement Region

8.6.1. Site background

The site is a working woodland operated by a co-operative which manages four small woodlands, producing sustainable and high-quality timber and facilitating a range of events from their workshop. As an organisation, they are dedicated to sustainable rural development and improving access for the public. The site demonstrates how outcomes for people, jobs, skills, and the rural economy can be an intrinsic part of a well-managed, resilient woodland in harmony with outcomes for nature and biodiversity.

> ‘Essentially in a nutshell, it’s reviving the local economy with a view to biodiversity, alternative land use, and access and amenity to woodlands. There are very few woodlands that are managed to maintain the local economy.’ (Landowner)

The sites managed by the co-operative are mixed species woodlands, with both coniferous and broadleaved species which are managed for both biodiversity and timber production.

The cooperative boasts a group of forest practitioners, processors, and manufacturers, who use the timber product. The cooperative aims to support and encourage young people who want to enter into forestry or carpentry as a profession, with a workshop full of tools, machinery and woodworking equipment alongside support and advice.

8.6.2. National Forest support received

The site has received a TWIG grant to contribute to their woodlands being well managed with necessary infrastructure for community to access and harvest timber. Whilst they found their application for TWIG challenging and had valued the support of the WLO.

> ‘If it hadn't been for some professional help and advice, we would never have done it. [The WLO] was super helpful and patient and encouraging.’ (Landowner)

8.6.3. National Forest Status Scheme

The site is not yet part of the National Forest, but they are in the process of working to apply and have received support from a Woodland Liaison Officer.

8.6.4. Ambitions for the future

Overall, the site is positive about the concept of the National Forest for Wales and highlights the range of benefits of the inclusion of productive woodlands that are accessible to and engage with people as an intrinsic aspect of the programme.

9. Annex C: Research Tools

9.1. Scoping Interviews Discussion Guide

- Please introduce yourself and your role as it relates to the National Forest programme. What element or strand(s) of the programme are you involved in?
- How would you sum up what the National Forest programme overall is trying to achieve?
- What has been your experience of the progress made in the delivery of the National Forest programme from 2022 onwards? [Prompts: delivery and uptake of the grant schemes, the introduction of the Woodland Liaison Officers, the launch of the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme]
- How has the programme responded to learning and feedback since its launch? Are you aware of the findings from the evaluation of the National Forest Demonstrator schemes? If so, how has the programme responded to these?
- From your perspective, what would success look like for the programme in the short, medium and longer-term? By short term we mean 2025, medium term by 2030 and longer-term beyond this.
- What systems are currently in place to monitor and assess the programme's progress in managing existing woodland and connecting them with new woodland areas through tree planting?
- How is progress against the six high level outcomes for the National Forest being measured? Are these any gaps or challenges with the existing monitoring and measurement process?
- Are there any barriers to overcome to achieve the outcomes that have been identified for the programme?
- Has the interest in and take-up of the four grant schemes to support the development of the National Forest been at the level envisaged at the outset of the programme? If not, what are the reasons for this?
- What are your views and experiences of the operation of the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme since it was launched in June 2023?
- What are the key opportunities for the programme over the next 2 years? How can these be realised? [Prompts: public support for habitat restoration and creation, growth of green tourism and leisure].
- To what extent is the National Forest programme contributing to policies and strategies in relation to a) climate change, b) creating strong and cohesive communities, c) connecting people with nature, and d) equality, diversity, and inclusion? What mechanisms or enablers need to be in place to ensure this contribution?

- Finally, do you have any further comments you would like to make in relation to the issues we've discussed today or the evaluation of the National Forest programme more generally? Or is there anything else in particular the evaluation should seek to explore?

9.2. Funding/Investment Manager and Partner Interviews Discussion Guide

- Please introduce yourself and provide an overview of your role and how this relates to the National Forest for Wales programme?
- What is your understanding of the vision set out in the Woodland for Wales strategy and how do you think the National Forest for Wales programme is contributing to this?
- What is your view on the concept of the National Forest for Wales as a concept to meet the vision set out in the Woodland for Wales strategy? What is your view of the programme as a concept for protecting existing woodlands?
- How well have these concepts been communicated and understood? Has this changed over time?
- How does the National Forest for Wales programme align with your organisation's own strategy, values, and objectives?
- Are you aware of the findings from the National Forest Demonstrators Scheme? If so, have they influenced your learning in terms of how to support National Forest delivery?
- What are your views on the effectiveness of the different mechanisms that have been used to support the development of the National Forest from 2022 onwards in engaging and encouraging site owners to join the National Forest network?
    - The Woodland Investment Grant (TWIG)
    - My Tree Our Forest (MTOF)
    - Coetiroedd Bach (Tiny Forests)
- [For Llais y Goedwig and Coed Cadw] How have you used the findings from the MTOF initiative to support your organisation's own delivery to support tree creation and maintenance? Has this informed any other activities that would support the National Forest for Wales?
- Do you have any suggestions for changes or improvements to the mechanisms that have been used to support the development of the National Forest?
- What has been the profile of grant recipients you have supported (e.g. organisations or individuals)? Has this been as expected?
- How effectively are communities (including Welsh Language communities) being involved within National Forest delivery?
- What are your experiences of implementing your application and grant delivery for organisations and individuals that have chosen to apply to funding schemes or the Status scheme in Welsh?
- How successfully have your grant recipients implemented the funding they've received as part of the National Forest Programme? Have they been able to deliver

what they set out in their application? What challenges have they come across? How have these challenges been overcome?

- In your view, how have the grants you have been involved in or the grantees you oversee contributed to the National Forest for Wales?
- How does the delivery of the National Forest for Wales grants complement your wider suite of grants?
- What are your views and experiences of the operation of the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme since it was launched in June 2023?
- From your perspective, what would success look like for the programme in the short, medium, and longer-term? By short term we mean 2025, medium term by 2030 and longer-term beyond this.
- To what extent is the National Forest programme contributing to policies and strategies in relation to a) climate change, b) creating strong and cohesive communities, c) connecting people with nature, and d) equality, diversity, and inclusion? What mechanisms or enablers need to be in place to ensure this contribution?
- What are the key opportunities for the programme over the next 2 years? How can these be realised? [Prompts: public support for habitat restoration and creation, growth of green tourism and leisure].
- Sites that have joined the Status Scheme are required to produce management plan. As the Status Scheme is not a funding opportunity, how do you think the management of these sites can be resourced in the future?
- Finally, do you have any further comments you would like to make in relation to the issues we've discussed today or the evaluation of the National Forest programme more generally? Or is there anything in particular the evaluation should seek to explore that we haven't already covered?

9.3. Natural Resources Wales Interview Discussion Guide

- Please introduce yourself and provide an overview of your role and how this relates to the National Forest for Wales programme?
- What is your understanding of the vision set out in the Woodland for Wales strategy and how do you think the National Forest for Wales programme is contributing to this?
- What is your view on the concept of the National Forest for Wales as a concept to meet the vision set out in the Woodland for Wales strategy? What is your view of the programme as a concept for protecting existing woodlands?
- How well have these concepts been communicated and understood? Has this changed over time?
- What are your views on the Woodlands for Wales Indicators as a mechanism for measuring progress towards the strategy?
- Are you aware of the findings from the National Forest Demonstrators Scheme? If so, have they influenced your learning in terms of how to support National Forest delivery?
- What are your views on the effectiveness of the different mechanisms that have been used to support the development of the National Forest from 2022 onwards in engaging and encouraging site owners to join the National Forest network?
    - The Woodland Investment Grant (TWIG)
    - My Tree Our Forest (MTOF)
    - Coetiroedd Bach (Tiny Forests)
- What are your views and experiences of the operation of the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme since it was launched in June 2023?
- What changes has there been to the day-to-day management of the WGWE sites now that they are part of the National Forest network?
- Has there been any impact on the Welsh Government Woodland Estate (WGWE) since being designated as National Forest sites? For example, increased profile, visitor numbers or investment.
- What impact, if any, has the introduction of the National Forest as a concept had on the WGWE both strategically and practically?
- From your perspective, what would success look like for the programme in the short, medium and longer-term? By short term we mean 2025, medium term by 2030 and longer-term beyond this.
- To what extent is the National Forest programme contributing to policies and strategies in relation to a) climate change, b) creating strong and cohesive communities, c) connecting people with nature, and d) equality, diversity, and

inclusion? What mechanisms or enablers need to be in place to ensure this contribution?

- What are the key opportunities for the programme over the next 2 years? How can these be realised? [Prompts: public support for habitat restoration and creation, growth of green tourism and leisure].
- Finally, do you have any further comments you would like to make in relation to the issues we've discussed today or the evaluation of the National Forest programme more generally? Or is there anything in particular the evaluation should seek to explore that we haven't already covered?

9.4. Woodland Liaison Officer Interview Discussion Guide

- Please introduce yourself and provide an overview of your role as a Woodland Liaison Officer?
- Do you have previous experience of woodland restoration and creation or liaising with woodland owners prior to this role?
- Please provide an overview of your role and the nature of the support you provide (e.g. support provided for TWIG, Tiny Forests and National Forest for Wales Status Scheme).
- What is your understanding of the vision set out in the Woodland for Wales strategy and how do you think the National Forest for Wales programme is contributing to this?
- Is the concept of the National Forest programme understood by landowners/managers and the general public? Have any challenges been encountered in landowners or the general public understanding of the concept?
- Please describe the management arrangements for the Woodland Liaison team. How effective has this been? Do you have any suggestions for improving the existing management approach?
- How do you interact with the other WLOs outside of your Area Statement region?
- What training or professional development opportunities have you received to support the delivery of your role? Are there any gaps in the training that need to be addressed?
- Based on your experience to date, what is the level of awareness and understanding amongst woodland owners of the Woodland for Wales Strategy and the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme?
- What activities have you undertaken to promote your role and the support you are able to provide? (e.g. how landowners/managers are identified and engaged? How frequently are they engaged?
- What approaches have you used to engage with woodland owners across your region? Are there any groups of owners that you have struggled to reach and what action have you taken to address this?
- What are your views on the design of the Status Scheme? For example, the balance between the essential and flexible outcomes?
- Are there any aspects of the current Status Scheme that you feel may be discouraging woodland owners from joining? For example, the application process, the requirement for a woodland management plan or ongoing funding support for sites joining the scheme?
- Based on your experience to date, what is the level of awareness amongst woodland owners of the funding opportunities available to them to help bring woodlands into

the National Forest network? Does this differ by owner type (e.g. farmer, local authority, community group)?

- What is your experience to date of offering support to prospective applicants for The Woodland Investment Grant (TWIG) and Coetiroedd Bach (Tiny Forests)?
    - The design, application process and level of funding available?
    - Making contact with prospective applicants?
    - Their attractiveness to prospective applicants?
    - Monitoring and reporting requirements?
- To what extent have woodland owners required capacity building, information, and/or reassurance to encourage them to submit applications to the above schemes?
- What type of sites have you been able to bring into the National Forest? What benefits do you think these sites are bringing to Wales?
- Have you experienced any challenges in the delivery of your role in supporting woodland owners? How have these been addressed? What support have you received?
- Please describe how you have worked with sites that may require more support to be brought into the National Forest network.
- To what extent to do feel that you have encouraged woodland owners to take-up best practice in relation to woodland management and creation?
- Do you have any suggested areas for development or improvement in relation to the role of the Woodland Liaison team? For example, the level and nature of support that can be provided to sites that may be harder to bring into the National Forest network.
- Do you have any further comments you would like to make in relation to the issues we've discussed today or the evaluation of the National Forest programme more generally? Or is there anything in particular the evaluation should seek to explore that we haven't already covered?
- Finally, our evaluation will be hoping to capture views on the National Forest programme and sites that have joined the Status Scheme both from people that have visited the sites and those that have not. Do you have any views or suggestions on our approach to reaching and engaging local communities?

9.5. National Forest Network Members and Grant Recipients Survey

- Which of the following National Forest support mechanisms has your organisation applied for: [Multiple choice] Please select **all** support mechanisms you applied for.
    - My Tree, Our Forest (or the Plant a tree for me initiative)
    - The Woodland Investment Grant (TWIG) funding
    - Coetiroedd Bach/Tiny Forest funding
    - Support / advice from Woodland Liaison Officers based in Natural Resources Wales on achieving National Forest Status
    - None [End survey]
- Which of the following National Forest support mechanisms has your organisation received: [Multiple choice] Please select all support mechanisms you applied for and received for the project.
    - My Tree, Our Forest (or the Plant a tree for me initiative)
    - The Woodland Investment Grant (TWIG) funding
    - Coetiroedd Bach/Tiny Forest funding
    - Support / advice from Woodland Liaison Officers based in Natural Resources Wales on achieving National Forest Status
    - None [End survey]
- [If anonymous survey link disseminated] Please provide the name of your organisation:
- [If anonymous survey link disseminated] Please provide the name of your project:
- [If anonymous survey link disseminated] Please provide the postcode of your site:
- Has your site applied for the National Forest Status Scheme?
    - Yes- our site has applied for and achieved the National Forest status
    - Yes - our site has applied and are waiting on the result of our application for National Forest status
    - No but we are working towards being able to apply
    - No but we are planning to apply for National Forest status in the future
    - No and we have no plans to apply for National Forest status in the future
    - Not sure
- [If No and have no plans to apply to Q6] Which of the following best describe why your site is not applying for National Forest status: [Multiple choice]
    - We do not have the time/staff resource to apply for the scheme
    - We do not have the time/staff resource to develop the required evidence for the scheme e.g. a woodland management plan

    - We are not confident that our site's application would be approved
    - We do not want to spend time undertaking the required paperwork to apply for the scheme
    - We do not know enough about the scheme to know whether it is right for our site
    - We do not feel that the scheme is appropriate for our site
    - Other
        - Please provide any additional details: [Open/video response]
        - [If No and have no plans to apply to Q6] Is there any additional support that would allow you to apply for the National Forest Scheme? If so, please describe: [Open/video response]
- Had you heard of the National Forest for Wales before receiving [support mechanisms seeded from Q1]?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Don't know
- What, in your view, is the National Forest for Wales?

  [Open/video response]
- Why did your organisation apply for and receive [support mechanism seeded from Q2]? Please explain why you applied for this support and what you were looking to get out of the support [Open/video response]
- [If accessed funding support mechanisms Q2] Did you apply for funding in English or Welsh?
- [If accessed funding support mechanisms Q2] Which statement below best reflects your experience of applying for [seed funding from Q2]:
    - The process was very clear and straightforward
    - The process was quite clear and straightforward
    - The process was quite unclear and challenging
    - The process was very unclear and challenging
    - Don't know
    - I was not involved in this process
        - [All answers except 'I was not involved in this process'] Why do you say that?
- [If accessed funding support mechanisms Q2] How, if at all, could this application process be improved in the future? [Open/video response]

  [Section for respondents who state in Q3 that they have accessed TWIG funding]

- Did you receive support or advice from your Woodland Liaison Officer (WLO) when applying for TWIG?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Don’t know
- [If Yes to Q13] How effective was the support your organisation received from your WLO on your TWIG application?
    - Very effective
    - Quite effective
    - Neither effective nor ineffective
    - Not very effective
    - Not effective at all
    - Don’t know
        - Why do you say that?
        - How, if at all, could this WLO advice have been improved?
- Did you receive support or advice from your National Lottery Heritage Fund Investment Manager when applying for TWIG?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Don’t know
- [If Yes to Q15] How effective was the support your organisation received from your National Lottery Heritage Fund Investment Manager on your TWIG application?
    - Very effective
    - Quite effective
    - Neither effective nor ineffective
    - Not very effective
    - Not effective at all
    - Don’t know
        - Why do you say that?
        - How, if at all, could this advice have been improved?
- Once your application was successful, to what extent were you satisfied with the ongoing support received from your Investment Manager at The Heritage Fund?

  [Matrix question with answers for both options: Very satisfied, Quite satisfied, Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, Quite dissatisfied, Very dissatisfied, Don’t know]

    - Why do you say that?
    - How, if at all, could this advice have been improved?
- What did you aim to achieve through TWIG? [Open/video response]
- Which of the following outcomes do you feel your organisation is delivering against as a result of your TWIG funding: [Multiple choice]
    - Good quality, well-designed and managed resilient woodlands
    - Woodlands accessible to people
    - Community involvement in woodlands
    - Connected woodlands
    - Dynamic, multi-purpose woodlands and trees
    - Woodlands that demonstrate learning, research, and innovation
- How much progress has your organisation made in achieving these aims and outcomes? Please select the statement which best describes your response.
    - A lot of progress - we have seen evidence to suggest we have achieved these aims and outcomes
    - Some progress - we are seeing some evidence to suggest we are starting to achieve these aims and outcomes
    - No progress - we have not seen evidence to suggest we are starting to achieve these aims and outcomes yet
        - [If no progress] Why do you think this is? Please explain if there are any external barriers that have prevented progress or if it is too early to see progress.
        - [If a lot or some progress] How, if at all, has this progress been measured?
- [If applied for NF status or planning to apply in Q6] In your view, how much has TWIG funding influenced your ability to apply for National Forest Status, if at all?
    - TWIG funding played a big part in helping us to get in a position to apply for funding
    - TWIG funding played a small part in helping us to get into a position to apply for funding
    - We would have been in a position to apply for National Forest Status, regardless of TWIG funding
    - I don’t know
        - Please explain your answer:
- Has the TWIG funding resulted in any other changes on or for your site? Changes may include positive and/or negative changes that have occurred. Open/video response]

- Are there any unintended consequences that have occurred as a result of your site's TWIG funding? This may include outcomes that you did not anticipate when applying for the funding
    - Yes
    - No
    - Don't know
        - [If yes] Please provide details of the unintended consequence[s]:

[Section for respondents who state in Q3 that they have accessed Coetiroedd Bach funding]

- Did you receive support or advice from your Woodland Liaison Officer (WLO) when applying for Coetiroedd Bach/Tiny Forest funding?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Don't know
- [If Yes to Q22] In your opinion, how effective was the support your organisation received from your WLO on your Coetiroedd Bach/Tiny Forest application?
    - Very effective
    - Quite effective
    - Neither effective nor ineffective
    - Not very effective
    - Not effective at all
    - Don't know
        - Why do you say that?
- In your opinion, how effective was training received from Earthwatch to create a Coetir Bach/Tiny Forest?
    - Very effective
    - Quite effective
    - Neither effective nor ineffective
    - Not very effective
    - Not effective at all
    - Don't know
        - Why do you say that?
- Once your application was successful, to what extent were you satisfied with the ongoing support received from:
    - Earthwatch

- Your Investment Manager at The Heritage Fund

[Matrix question with answers for both options: Very satisfied, Quite satisfied, Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, Quite dissatisfied, Very dissatisfied, Don't know]

- Is there any other support your organisation would have liked to have received regarding your Coetir Bach/Tiny Forest?
- How is your Coetir Bach/Tiny Forest being maintained? Within your answer, please detail any community involvement. [Open/video response]
- Has your organisation faced any challenges creating or maintaining your Coetir Bach/Tiny Forest?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Don't know
        - [If Yes] Please explain the challenge(s) faced including if and how you overcame them:
- Has the Coetir Bach/Tiny Forest Initiative resulted in any other changes for your site? This may include positive and/or negative changes [Open/video response]

[Section for National Forest Status respondents who state in Q2 that they have accessed support / advice from Woodland Liaison Officers]

- In your opinion, how effective was the advice and support from your Woodland Liaison Officer (WLO) on your National Forest Status Scheme application?
    - Very effective
    - Quite effective
    - Neither effective nor ineffective
    - Not very effective
    - Not effective at all
    - Don't know
        - Why do you say that?
- Did the advice and guidance from WLOs help you to better understand what the National Forest for Wales is?
    - Yes, it was very helpful
    - Yes, it was quite helpful
    - It was neither helpful nor unhelpful – I already had a good understanding
    - No, it was quite unhelpful
    - No, it was very unhelpful

    - Not applicable - I have not received guidance or advice from WLOs on what the National Forest is
    - Don’t know
        - Please explain your answer: [Open/video response]
- Is there any other support your organisation would have liked to have received regarding your National Forest status application?
- [If successful with application Q6] In your view, has your organisation benefitted from being part of the National Forest Network? This may include accessing resources, collaborating with other Network members or attending online seminars and in-person events.
    - We have benefitted a lot
    - We have benefitted a little
    - We have not benefitted very much
    - We have not benefitted at all
    - Don’t know
        - Why do you say that? [Open/video response]
        - How could the Network evolve to better support your organisation? E.g. Are there any specific resources, collaboration opportunities, or topics you'd like to see addressed through future events or initiatives?
- [If successful with application Q6] How likely is it that you would have achieved National Forest status without the support of your WLO?
    - Very likely
    - Quite likely
    - Neither likely nor unlikely
    - Quite unlikely
    - Very unlikely
    - Don’t know
        - Why do you say that?
- How, if at all, has your organisation changed the management of its site(s) since gaining National Forest status?
    - A lot
    - Somewhat
    - Not at all
    - Don’t know
        - Please explain your answer:

- [Seed wording from Q6] Has [applying for/gaining] National Forest Status resulted in any change (positive or negative) for your woodland(s)? [Open/video response]
- [If No to Q6] Does your site currently have a site management plan?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Don't know
- Has your organisation received any other support or funding to support your site/project:
    - Yes
    - No
    - Don't know
        - [If yes] Please provide details:
- [If Yes to Q6] The National Forest Status Scheme requires all participating organisations to create a management plan for maintaining their National Forest sites. Looking ahead, how do you plan to resource the maintenance outlined in your site's management plan? [Open/video response]
- Looking forward, what kind of activity or intervention would you like to see from the National Forest for Wales to support your woodland/site(s)? [Open/video response]
- As part of this evaluation, we will invite several network members and grant recipients to participate in a short interview with one of our researchers. The purpose of this interview is to delve deeper into survey responses and gain a better understanding of experiences with the National Forest programme. Would you be interested in participating?
    - Yes
    - No
        - [If yes] Please provide your contact details below:
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience of the National Forest Programme?

9.6. Supported Stakeholder Interview Discussion Guide

- Please can I confirm the support mechanisms that your organisation applied for and which, if any, you received?
- What are your ambitions for your woodland site? (e.g. woodland creation, providing learning opportunities, connecting people with nature)
- Prior to accessing support through [received National Forest for Wales support mechanism] what were your plans in realising these ambitions?
    - Did the support you received from [identified National Forest for Wales support mechanism] change these ambitions at all?
- You mentioned that your organisation is delivering against the following aims and outcomes [add detail from survey]. Please can you provide detail on your progress made in achieving these outcomes?

[Note: This section of questions is only for sites that are part of National Forest scheme who have developed their management plan. Please note that the Status Scheme requires sites to have a management plan of the woodlands themselves e.g. managing woodlands sustainably rather than management of the site in general e.g. car parking.]

- Have you changed the management of your woodland as a result of applying for or gaining National Forest Status? If so, what changes have you made?
- How are you currently resourcing the delivery of your management plan? How sustainable or secure is your current funding or resources?
- Have you experienced any challenges or barriers in implementing your management plan [where applicable]?
- Are you aware of/actively seeking funding to support the delivery of your management plan? If yes, please provide details.
- Has becoming part of the National Forest impacted on the way you manage your whole site more generally?
- Have you engaged with local communities (including Welsh language communities) as part of your:
    - Implementation of grant funding [e.g. TWIG or other support mechanism accessed]?
    - [If part of the National Forest] Implementation of your management plan?

[Probe on the kinds of activities they do to engage local communities and whether there is any outreach to particular groups in the community)

- Which communities have you engaged (e.g. local communities or wider communities) and what approaches have you used?
- Have you experienced any challenges or barriers in engaging or involving communities?

- Are there any communities or groups that you would like to engage that you have struggled to reach?
- What impacts has engaging with the National Forest had on your site?
- [If improved access is identified in survey responses] To what extent do you think your involvement in the National Forest for Wales programme has or will improve access to your site? [Prompt: is this increasing the accessibility of the site e.g. accessible paths or increased public engagement with the site e.g. promotion]
- What outcomes do you think your woodland site is delivering for visitors/users/local communities?
- Do you have any ideas or suggestions for evaluating your impact in the future?
- Have there been any unintended consequences for your woodland site from your engagement with the National Forest for Wales programme? If so, please provide details. (e.g. new partnerships, increased visitor numbers?
- Why was it important for you to apply for the National Forest Status Scheme? What led you to apply?
- What difference has been part of the Status Scheme meant for you site? (probe on profile, access to support and guidance, signposting to funding)
- Has the National Forest signage and promotion that you're part of National Forest site provided any impacts for your site [where applicable]?
    - [If signage not used] Are there any reasons why your site has chosen not to use this signage?
- Are you currently involved in the National Forest for Wales Network?
    - If yes, how useful have these been for developing your learning and informing the management of your woodland site? Do you have any suggestions for changes to how the network is currently administered that would benefit you or your site?
    - If no, would you be interested in participating in the network?
    - Are there any areas, topics, or themes you would like to be included within network meetings to support your delivery?
- What kind of activity or intervention would you like to see from the National Forest for Wales or Welsh Government to support your woodland/site? [add detail from survey response]
- Do you have any suggestions for how the Woodland Liaison Officers (WLOs) could support you in achieving your ambitions for your woodland site? For example, any changes to the type or level of support they offer?
- What other support, if any, are you able to access outside of the WLO team to support you in achieving your ambitions for your woodland site?

- Do you think gaining National Forest for Wales Status has helped your site to access or secure further funding opportunities?
- Have you taken part in any other comparable forestry programmes in the past? If so, please provide details.