National Forest for Wales – Mid-Term Evaluation – Phase 2 Report
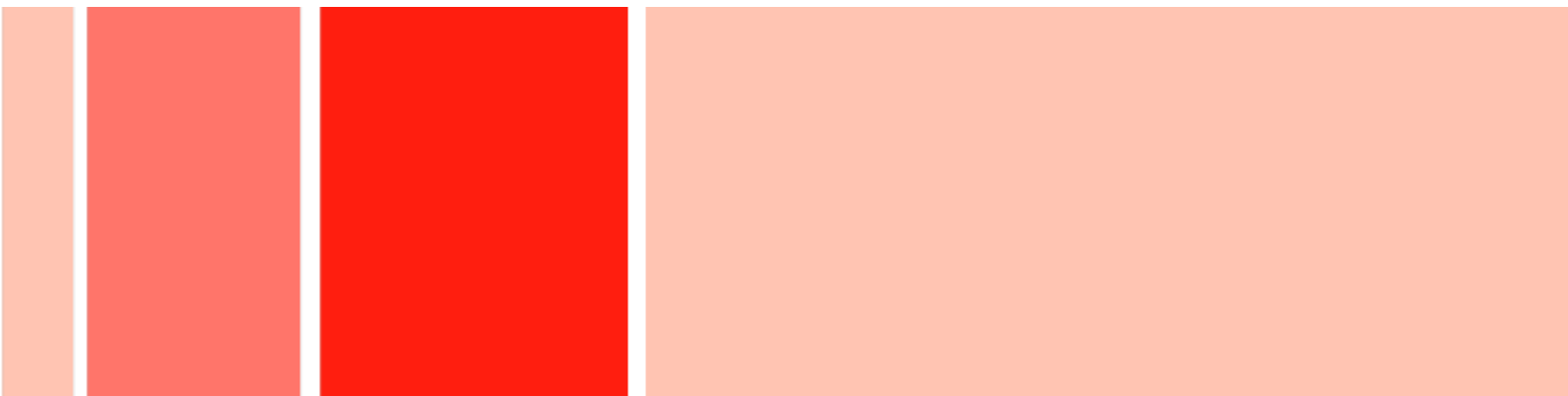
Title: National Forest for Wales: Mid-Term Evaluation

Authors: Andy Parkinson, Anna Burgess, Megan Clark,
Dr Nikola Vousden and Rhys Maher.

Table of contents

List of figures

Glossary

AFC- Active Forest Coordinators

AONB - Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

CIC - Community Interest Company

CLA - Country Land and Business Association

Defra - Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

EWCO - England Woodland Creation Offer

FSC - Forest Stewardship Council

HEFCW- Higher Education Funding Council for Wales

MTOF – My Tree Our Forest

NLHF - National Lottery Heritage Fund

NRW - Natural Resources Wales

ORVal - Outdoor Recreation Valuation Tool

PaNS - People and Nature Survey

PEFC - Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification

POFS - Public Opinion of Forestry Survey

POS – Point of Sale

QALY - Quality Adjusted Life Year

ReBLS - Renewing Biodiversity Longitudinal Survey

SWEMWBS - Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale

TWIG - The Woodland Investment Grant

UKFS - UK Forestry Standard

UKWAS - UK Woodland Assurance Standard

WGWE - Welsh Government Woodland Estate

WLO - Woodland Liaison Officer

1   Introduction and 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 with an aim 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 as demonstrator sites, 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.'

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 the list below.

1.1 Overview of delivery mechanisms

Delivery mechanism 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.

Delivery mechanism 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.

Delivery mechanism 3: Woodland Liaison Officers (WLOs)
- Date introduced: September 2022
- Aim: To support woodland owners through the National Forest Status Scheme, signpost funding opportunities, and provide woodland management guidance. There is one WLO for each of the six Area Statement regions, which are operational areas used by NRW.

Delivery mechanism 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.

Delivery mechanism 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 and it is still open to applications. 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 which is guided by the UK Forestry Standard (UKFS)). 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 for instance. As of the 26th November 2025 there are 72 Status Scheme sites, the full list of National Forest for Wales sites are available to view on the Visit the National Forest for Wales webpage.

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'.

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.

Expanding on the woodlands for people goal, a key part of the Woodlands for Wales strategy is the four key outcomes outlining where woodlands and trees contribute to the improvement of people's wellbeing, namely:

- More communities are involved with, and benefit from their local woodlands and trees.

- More people, of all ages, benefit from education and learning opportunities provided in, and by, woodlands and trees.

- More people live healthier lives as a result of using, enjoying, and living in proximity to, woodlands and trees.

- More people benefit from woodland-related enterprises and associated employment opportunities.

The Woodlands for Wales Strategy also sets out an ambition to achieve at least a minimum planting rate of 2,000ha each year. Tree cover in the wider environment is also aimed to increase. The National Forest for Wales programme cuts across all four themes outlined in the Woodlands for Wales Strategy, focusing on improving access, involving communities and facilitating learning.

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 covers delivery from September 2022 to October 2025 and uses process and impact evaluation methodologies. The main aims of the evaluation are to:

- evaluate the delivery of the National Forest for Wales from September 2022 to December 2024, 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 since the launch of the Status Scheme in June 2023; and

- recommend a design for assessing the social impact of the programme in the future, including what should be built into the programme to support social impact evaluation.

This Phase 2 report builds on the work undertaken in Phase 1 of the evaluation which focused on the delivery of the National Forest programme from 2022 to December 2024 (bullet point 1 above), including exploring the effectiveness of the delivery mechanisms introduced, staff roles, funding and the National Forest Status scheme.

The Phase 1 report found that TWIG funding has supported the growth in the National Forest network. As well as encouraging and supporting sites to become ready to join the Status Scheme, interviews with Status Scheme sites undertaken for the Phase 1 report highlighted how 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.

Positive feedback was captured via a survey of Status Scheme sites on the process of applying to the Status Scheme. For sites that had joined the National Forest Status Scheme, the support and advice provided from the Woodland Liaison Team was rated by most sites responding to the survey as very effective.

Positive feedback was also provided by survey respondents regarding the National Forest network was enabling sites that have achieved National Forest Status to share knowledge, practice and learning.

The Phase 1 report found that a small number of stakeholders interviewed by Wavehill (referred to in the remainder of the report as the evaluation team) 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 which align with the core aims of the Woodlands for Wales Strategy. Whilst there was a consensus of stakeholder support for the programme, this suggested that it would be helpful for the concept, delivery approach and associated timelines to be restated and communicated to the key stakeholders.

In summary, the Phase 1 report suggested that the delivery of the programme was 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. The report concluded that the opportunity for sites to learn from each other and incorporate best practice through their engagement in the National Forest network has real potential to help sites to understand how to continue to deliver against the six high level outcomes and achieve longer-term impacts for woodlands and communities.

This Phase 2 report is focused on understanding the views of communities and organisations on the National Forest as a concept for increasing woodlands in Wales and their experiences so far with National Forest sites, including any perceived benefits. It also explores what impact evaluation methodologies would be suitable to apply to evaluate the National Forest in the future, and what needs to be built into the programme to enable this. This evaluation does not look to measure the environmental or economic 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 from engagement with site users
- Impact evaluation methodologies
- Conclusions
- Recommendations
- Annexes.

2 Methodology

This section sets out the methodology, detailing the research conducted between July and October 2025 for the evaluation of the National Forest for Wales programme. Phase 2 of the evaluation explored how the National Forest is perceived by communities and examined their experiences of National Forest sites to date. Fieldwork within this phase also considered different approaches to measuring impact across the diverse range of sites to inform recommendations for the future design of the programme's impact measurement framework. An overview of the evaluation approach, phases, and key tasks is provided below.

2.1 Research Questions

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

2.1.1 Research Questions – Community engagement

1. How effectively are communities (including Welsh Language communities) being involved within National Forest delivery? Are those involved primarily located in proximity to selected sites?
2. Are there particular groups for which there have been any barriers to involvement in National Forest delivery?

2.1.2 Research Questions – Community views and experiences

3. What are community and organisations' views on the National Forest as a concept for increasing woodlands in Wales? Have these views changed as the intervention has been rolled out?
4. What have been the experiences of communities so far with National Forest sites including any perceived benefits?

2.1.3 Research Question – Impact evaluation methodologies

5. What impact evaluation methodologies would be suitable to apply to evaluation of the National Forest in the future?
6. What needs to be built into the programme to robustly evaluate its impact in the future?

2.2 Fieldwork delivery

Key evaluation activities have included the following:

- Case studies at a sample of National Forest for Wales sites to capture and explore community views and experiences. Site selection was undertaken in conjunction with the Welsh Government and the WLO team [footnote 1] and was designed to ensure representation across NRW's Area Statement regions, as well as a balance between WGWE and non-WGWE sites. All WGWE sites selected had community management agreements in place and were selected as community woodland managers would be well placed to support engagement with community members during site visits. This site selection approach aimed to ensure that insights reflected a range of different site types across Wales. An initial longlist of 16 potential case study sites was developed by the evaluation team. Prospective site managers were then interviewed to assess their suitability and willingness to host fieldwork activities. These discussions explored how each site engaged with communities, the extent of any regular volunteering activity, their wider visitor offer (for example, links to nearby attractions or visitor facilities), how visitor engagement was monitored, and whether there were upcoming events suitable for fieldwork attendance. This process ensured that selected case study sites could provide purposeful insights into community engagement and experiences. Following these interviews, a shortlist of nine suitable case study sites was identified. One site subsequently withdrew due to staff availability constraints, resulting in a final sample of eight case study sites.

- Development of fieldwork plans for each case study site, with research activities undertaken between August and October 2025 (see Annex A). A suite of research tools was produced to support data collection including:

  - Semi-structured interview guides for site management staff, external event and activity organisers, volunteers and visitors,

  - Focus group guides for visitors and volunteers,

  - A bespoke online community survey to capture views from visitors and users on their respective case study site and the National Forest concept.

- Fieldwork activities were undertaken across eight case study sites. This included 17 site visits and evaluation team fieldwork with 16 site management staff, 46 volunteers, 83 visitors and representatives from seven external activity organisers, such as schools and local community groups. The community survey received 137 responses from visitors across the eight sites. The survey did not ask respondents to specify whether they volunteered at the site alongside their visit. There is likely to be a response bias in the community survey findings given

---

Footnotes
[1] As highlighted above, WLOs support woodland owners through the National Forest Status Scheme, signposting funding opportunities, and providing woodland management guidance. There is a WLO supporting each specific area statement region in Wales (South East, South West, South Central, Mid, North East and North West).

that site managers proactively promoted the survey using a range of channels, some of which are likely to be accessed by people with greater connections to woodland sites, this may include site volunteers. In turn this may mean these individuals may be more likely to respond to the survey.

- Details of how the evaluation team approached fieldwork at each case study site are provided over page:
  - o Chirk Castle, North East Area Statement Region
    - Two site visits were undertaken in August and October 2025. During the August visit, in-person semi-structured interviews were conducted with two members of staff and eight visitors, and a focus group was held with ten volunteers who regularly work in National Forest areas of the estate to explore their engagement with and understanding of the National Forest concept. The October visit included a further focus group with three regular volunteers based at Chirk Castle. Across all site visit engagement, the evaluation team spoke to two staff members, 13 volunteers and eight visitors.
    - The community survey was promoted through a QR code displayed at the visitor lodge and within the woodland throughout September. The survey received 67 responses from site visitors.
  - o Coed y Bont / Coed Dolgoed (WGWE), Mid Area Statement Region
    - Two site visits were undertaken in August and September 2025. During the August visit, semi-structured interviews were held with eight visitors and three staff members. The September visit coincided with a volunteer session and included semi-structured interviews with seven volunteers. Across all site visit engagement, the evaluation team spoke to three staff members, seven volunteers and eight visitors.
    - The community survey was disseminated via the site's Facebook page and promoted again later in the fieldwork period. A flyer containing a QR code linking to the survey was also displayed on the site noticeboard. The survey received two responses from site visitors.
  - o Mynydd Mawr Community Woods, South West Area Statement Region
    - Site visits were undertaken in August and September 2025. The first included semi-structured interviews with six volunteers and six visitors during a community activity. The second visit involved semi-structured interviews with one staff member from an external organisation delivering activity and eight visitors. Across all site visit engagement, the evaluation team spoke to one staff member from an external organisation delivering activity, six volunteers and 14 visitors.

- - The community survey was disseminated via the Friends group Facebook page, supported by a flyer with a QR code displayed on site noticeboards and in car parks. The survey received 17 responses from site visitors.
  - Naturewise Community Forest Garden, Mid Area Statement Region
    - Two site visits were undertaken in August and a third in September 2025. During the August visits, semi-structured interviews were held with five visitors, three staff members and four volunteers. The September visit coincided with the site's open day. Despite poor weather affecting attendance, six volunteer and four visitor interviews were completed during the event. During the September site visit, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with three representatives of external activity organisers, three visitors and six volunteers. Across all site visit engagement, the evaluation team spoke to three staff members, three staff members from external organisations delivering activity (one per organisation), 10 volunteers and nine visitors.
    - The community survey was disseminated via the Naturewise Facebook page and newsletter, with a QR code also shared during the site visit. In total, the survey received 12 responses from site visitors.
  - Porthkerry Country Park, South Central Area Statement Region
    - A site visit was undertaken to interview two rangers at Porthkerry Country Park. Due to summer staffing constraints, an external organisation was unable to bring volunteers to the site as planned. Instead, an online interview was conducted with one staff member from the external organisation's team. Across all site visit engagement, the evaluation team spoke to two staff members, and one staff member from an external organisation delivering activity.
    - The site's rangers promoted the community survey by displaying QR code links around the woodland and sharing them with the Friends of Porthkerry group. Contact details for three schools that had used the site were also provided, with the survey disseminated to them in mid-September; however, no responses had been received at the time of reporting. A follow-up site visit was undertaken in September 2025 to boost the number of on-site survey responses. The survey received 9 responses from site visitors.
  - Stackpole Woodland Estate, South West Area Statement Region
    - Two site visits were undertaken in September 2025 to engage directly with volunteers, visitors, and site staff. The first visit involved semi-structured interviews with four volunteers and two members of

staff, while the second included structured interviews with 20 visitors. Across all site visit engagement, the evaluation team spoke to two staff members, four volunteers and 20 visitors.

- The community survey was promoted through multiple channels, including a flyer with a QR code displayed on site noticeboards, the Friends of Pembrokeshire Coast National Park newsletter, the National Trust Facebook page, and the site's e-bulletin. The survey received 11 responses from site visitors.

- Sirhowy Hill Woodland, South East Area Statement Region

- A site visit was undertaken in September 2025 to attend a community engagement event. During the visit, semi-structured interviews were held with four members of staff about developments since the site achieved National Forest status, two stakeholders from external organisations delivering activity and four volunteers who were supporting the event. Across all site visit engagement, the evaluation team spoke to four staff members, two staff members from external organisations delivering activity (one per organisation), four volunteers and 15 visitors.

- Community survey QR codes were distributed to event visitors during a second site visit, primarily families, to encourage participation in the community survey. In total, the survey received 9 responses from site visitors.

- Spirit of Llynfi Woodlands (WGWE), South Central Area Statement Region

- Two site visits were undertaken in September 2025. The first took place during a volunteer day to engage with those involved in maintenance activities and included two semi-structured interviews with volunteers. During the second site visit, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with nine visitors. Across all site visit engagement, the evaluation team spoke to two volunteers and nine visitors.

- The QR code for the community survey was distributed during the site visit. A follow-up site visit was carried out in late September 2025 to boost the number of community survey responses. The survey received 10 responses from site visitors.

- A desk-based review of relevant research and impact reports from comparable woodland and forest programmes from across the UK. This process sought to guide the assessment of what impact evaluation methodologies would be suitable to apply to evaluation of the National Forest in the future.

- Seven semi-structured, in-depth online interviews with Forestry in Wales stakeholders between July and September 2025. The interviews aimed to develop an understanding of the programme's context and evolution, and to capture perspectives on its delivery since 2022. Discussions explored views on

the National Forest for Wales concept, priorities for future development, and approaches to measuring success.

Stakeholders included representatives from Forest Research, Stump Up for Trees, the National Trust, Bangor University, and three local authorities who have substantial involvement in the National Forest for Wales programme. All stakeholders were suggested by either the Welsh Government policy team or the WLO team in Natural Resources Wales.

- Seven semi-structured, in-depth online interviews with staff from organisations delivering forestry programmes across the UK, also between July and September 2025. These interviews explored how other schemes approach impact measurement, the challenges encountered, and the methodologies used to assess outcomes. Insights from these discussions were used to consider how comparable approaches could inform future impact evaluation within the National Forest for Wales. Participants included representatives from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, National Forest England, the Forestry Commission, Llais y Goedwig, Forestry and Land Scotland, and Climate Forest Initiatives.

- An impact measurement workshop, held on 12th September 2025, involving representatives from Welsh Government, the Natural Resources Wales WLO team, and Forest Research. The session provided an opportunity to present impact evaluation approaches used in other woodland and forest programmes across the UK. It also served to gather views on suitable options for the National Forest and to explore what would need to be built into the programme to enable future evaluation of its impact.

2.3 Approach to analysis

All evaluation fieldwork tools (e.g. interview topic guides and surveys) were developed with reference to the key research questions, ensuring that subsequent analysis could be aligned with these themes. Data collected through the mixed-methods approach were cross-referenced and analysed thematically. Qualitative data from interviews and open-text survey responses were coded using a thematic framework informed by the key research questions, while also allowing new themes to emerge in line with grounded theory principles. This enabled synthesis across fieldwork strands to identify common themes, assess their prevalence, and highlight variations in perspectives expressed by different stakeholder groups.

Quantitative data were analysed using standard frequency counts and cross-tabulations to examine responses provided by community survey participants. There was some variation in response numbers across survey questions, as such the base number for each question has been included where percentages are reported.

2.4 Limitations

The evaluation used a purposive sampling approach for the selection of case study sites. Sites were selected to maximise opportunities for engagement with visitors, volunteers, and

local community groups, and to explore examples of emerging good practice in community engagement.

During the design phase, the evaluation team and the Welsh Government considered an alternative approach that would have included a mix of sites with varying levels of community activity. However, it was agreed that this would be unlikely to generate sufficiently rich findings at this early stage of the National Forest's delivery and would not represent the most effective use of available resources. The decision was therefore taken to focus on sites with more established community activity as the most appropriate means of maximising engagement opportunities and generating useful insights.

The selection process also considered the capacity and willingness of site managers to permit and support fieldwork activities. As a purposive sample was used, the views and experiences captured are not intended to be representative of all 72 sites within the National Forest for Wales programme [footnote 2]. Instead, the findings provide illustrative insights into how the National Forest concept is being interpreted and delivered on the ground at this stage of programme delivery.

One of the methodological challenges encountered in engaging visitors and volunteers was the low levels of awareness of the National Forest for Wales programme. This limited the ability to capture views on the concept of the programme and whether the views of communities have changed as the National Forest Status Scheme has been rolled out. This broadly aligns with what is already understood about awareness of the National Forest for Wales.

The most recent Public Opinion of Forestry Survey for Wales highlights that the percentage of people that are aware of plans for a National Forest in Wales has decreased slightly from 20% in 2023 to 19% in 2025, this albeit remains higher than the 12% recorded in the 2021 survey.

Whilst the evaluation team completed repeated visits to the case study sites and made every effort to maximise opportunities to engage visitors, the volume of visitors varies across sites and is influenced by factors including the weather, day of the week, time of day, any organised events or activities and local awareness of the woodland or forest sites. As a result, the evaluation could only obtain a small sample of visitors, and the views and experiences of those engaged are not representative of all visitors or the wider community. Further work would be required to broaden out any consultation exercise to capture more representative views from existing visitors and communities around National Forest for Wales sites. This was beyond the agreed scope of this evaluation.

A further limitation relates to understanding views from communities on any changes or perceived benefits associated with National Forest sites, given the relatively short period between sites securing status and the timing of the fieldwork. Of the eight case study sites, three joined the Status Scheme in 2024 and one in 2025. Within the case study sites, four (Coed y Bont, Porthkerry Country Park, Naturewise and Sirhowy Hill Woodland) have

---

Footnotes

[2] Number of Status Scheme sites accurate as of 26th November 2025.

secured The Woodland Investment Grant (TWIG) funding, and the activities supported through these grants were not yet complete.

As a result, the views gathered from communities represent early reflections on benefits that are still emerging, rather than the full range of outcomes that may develop once activity is completed. These early insights are valuable and could be revisited in future evaluation phases to track how perceptions and benefits evolve as delivery progresses.

3 Findings from engagement with site users

This section of the report presents the findings relating to community views on the National Forest as a way to establish a nationwide network of woodlands and forests throughout Wales under high quality management. It also presents findings on the experiences of communities and organisations so far from a sub-set of National Forest sites, including any perceived benefits. It responds directly to research questions 3 and 4 as outlined in the previous section. These findings are drawn from a sample of eight case study National Forest sites, so are not necessarily representative of experiences across the network of 72 sites that have joined the National Forest Status Scheme.

The following list presents an overview of the eight case study sites. It includes details on when the site joined the National Forest for Wales network and whether the site has secured a TWIG grant.

3.1 Overview of case study sites

3.1.1   Chirk Castle (North East Area Statement Region)

- Based in Wrexham and located in the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), Chirk Castle is a medieval fortress built at the end of the 13th century. It is home to a walled garden and a wider estate of 480 hectares of woodland, meadow and grassland. It is managed by the National Trust.
- Year Joined: 2024
- TWIG recipient: No

3.1.2   Coed y Bont / Coed Dolgoed (Mid Area Statement Region)

- The 60 acre woodland is owned by Welsh Government and managed by NRW who have established a community management agreement with Coed y Bont Community Woodland Association. The woodland consists of two adjoining woods, Coed Dolgoed at a lower level and Coed Cnwch, on the adjacent hillside. The woodland contains a variety of native species.
- Year Joined: 2020
- TWIG recipient: No

3.1.3   Mynydd Mawr Community Woods (South West Area Statement Region)

- The woodland is owned by Carmarthenshire County Council and is situated on a former colliery site. At over 200 acres this former mix of farmland and coal mining is an example of how nature can quickly recover from the effects of destructive and invasive practices. Most of the vegetation found in the park is less than 60 years old and is growing on levelled coal spoil.
- Year Joined: 2023
- TWIG recipient: No

3.1.4 [Naturewise Community Forest Garden](#) (Mid Area Statement Region)

- The 5 acre site is a forest garden situated on land formerly designated for development as part of an industrial estate on the outskirts of Cardigan town. It was acquired by Naturewise Community Interest Company (CIC) through community asset transfer in 2019.
- Year Joined: 2024
- TWIG recipient: Yes, completed June 2023

3.1.5 [Porthkerry Country Park](#) (South Central Area Statement Region)

- Located in the Vale of Glamorgan, Porthkerry Country Park covers 220 acres of woods and meadowland in a sheltered valley leading to a pebble beach and spectacular cliffs. The park has several nature trails, picnic sites, a café and adventure play area. It is owned by the Vale of Glamorgan Council.
- Year Joined: 2023
- TWIG recipient: Yes, ongoing

3.1.6 [Sirhowy Hill Woodland](#) (South East Area Statement Region)

- Sirhowy Hill Woodland is a community woodland site spanning roughly 85 hectares near Tredegar in Blaenau Gwent. Once the site of an ancient woodland that was cleared to make way for coal mining and the Sirhowy Ironworks during the industrial revolution. The majority of the modern woodland was planted in phases between 1985 and 1990 and is now owned by Blaenau Gwent Council and managed by the Sirhowy Hill Woodlands group.
- Year Joined: 2025
- TWIG recipient: Yes, ongoing

3.1.7 [Spirit of Llynfi Woodland](#) (South Central Area Statement Region)

- The Spirit of Llynfi Woodland is on the site of the former Coegnant Colliery and Maesteg Washery, covering 65 hectares. Over 60,000 trees have been planted, originally by NRW as part of the Welsh Nature Fund, including a mixture of broadleaves, fruit and ornamental trees. The site links up to a Sustrans national cycle network path. The landscape includes ponds, marshland and heathland. The site is owned by Welsh Government and managed by Natural Resources Wales.
- Year Joined: 2020
- TWIG recipient: No

3.1.8 [Stackpole Woodland Estate](#) (South West Area Statement Region)

- The woodland is part of the wider National Trust owned Stackpole Estate, located between the villages of Stackpole and Bosherston within the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park. The woodland is a former managed estate woodland, which was

planted with conifers in the latter part of the twentieth century, and is in the process of being restored to native broadleaf woodland.

- Year Joined: 2024
- TWIG recipient: Yes, ongoing

3.2 Public attitudes to forestry in Wales

It is likely that public attitudes to the National Forest for Wales programme will be influenced by public attitudes to woodland and forests in general. As such, it is helpful to provide some context on existing evidence on public attitudes to woodlands, woodland recreation and community engagement. A key source of evidence is the findings from the Public Opinion of Forestry survey (POFS) Wales. POFS is a key source of data on public attitudes to forestry and forestry-related issues and has been conducted on a biennial basis since 1995. The 2025 survey findings, based on 1,038 respondents, provide useful context for changing attitudes to a range of areas of relevance to the National Forest for Wales programme.

Most respondents to the 2025 survey (87%) believed that the woodlands near them provide at least one benefit to the local community - this is a decrease from 2023, where 96% of respondents identified at least one benefit. Support for specific benefit areas presented to respondents also either declined or remained stable compared with 2023. Figure 3.1 presents key areas, identified by the evaluation team for their potential social benefits, where public support has decreased since 2021:

Figure 3.1 Proportion of respondents who identified benefits that woodlands provide for the local community, Wales 2017 to 2025
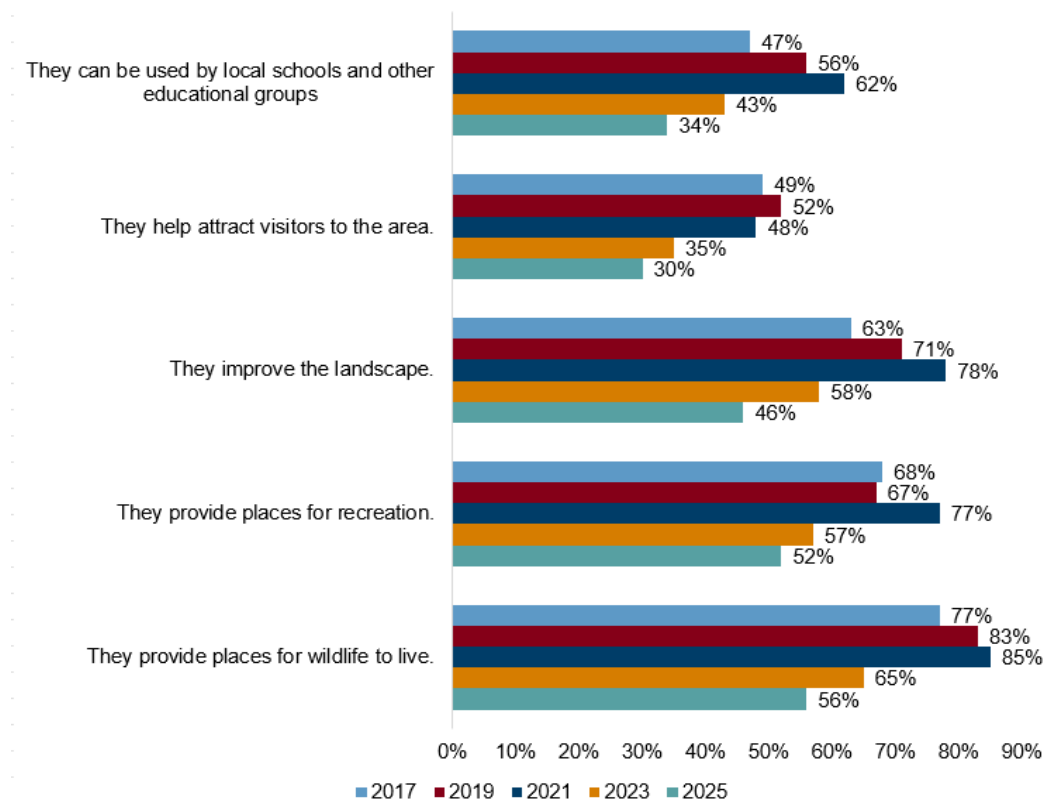
Description of Figure 3.1: Horizontal bar chart showing the percentage of respondents in Wales (2017 to 2025) who identified woodland benefits for communities. Top benefits include providing places for wildlife (up to 85%) and recreation (up to 77%), while attracting visitors and educational use are lower.

Source: Forest Research 2025

The POFS survey findings suggest that continued efforts are required to promote the benefits of woodlands for people, wildlife and the environment. Over the same time period the survey has also recorded a slight fall in the proportion of respondents who stated that they visited a woodland in the last 12 months, falling from 72% in 2017 to 68% in 2025. However, as shown in Figure 3.2, the proportions have both increased and decreased twice between 2017 and 2025.

Figure 3.2 Proportion of respondents who visited woodland in the last 12 months 2017 to 2025
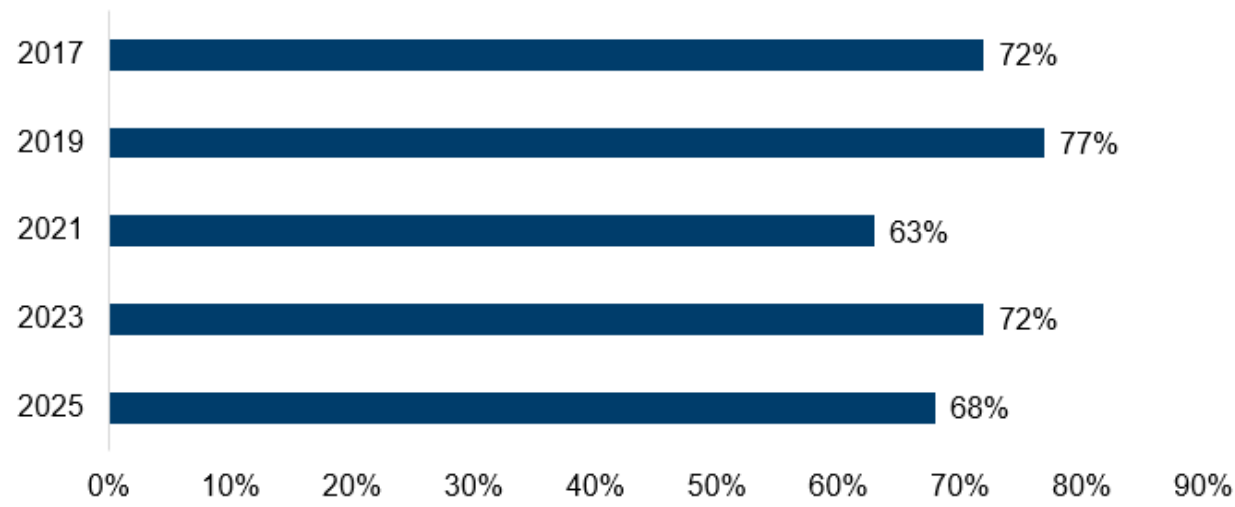
Source: Forest Research 2025

Respondents who had visited woodland in the last 12 months were asked about the activities they had undertaken. The survey reports a statistically significant decrease in people walking within woodlands, reducing from 89% in 2019 to 62% in 2025. As shown in Figure 3.3 over page, the proportions have decreased at each survey point since 2019.

Figure 3.3 Proportion of respondents who walked in woodlands in the last 12 months 2019 to 2025
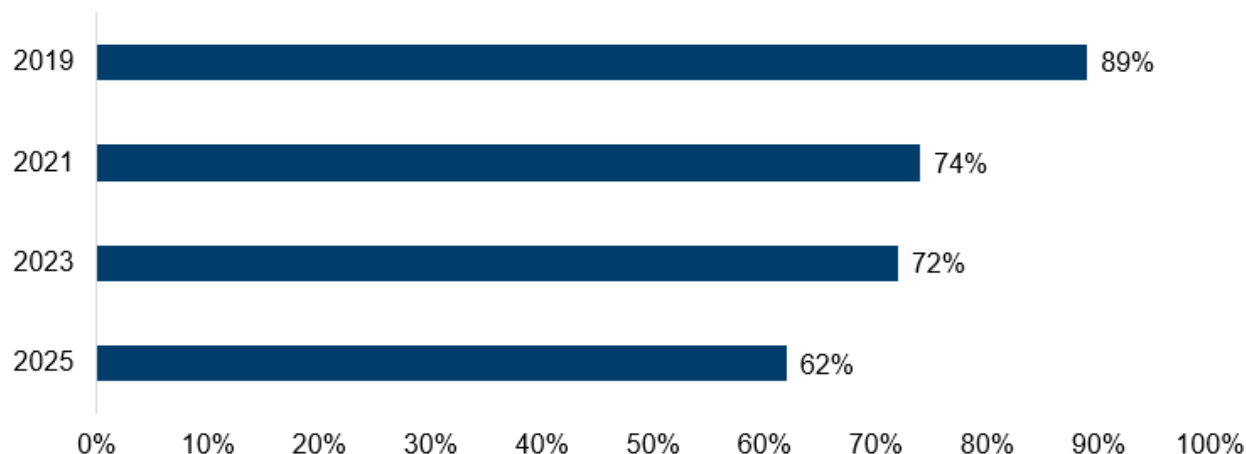
Source: Forest Research 2025

Levels of satisfaction with the woodland visited are high with the majority (94%) of respondents to the 2025 survey agreeing that they would visit the woodland again and 92% that they would recommend the woodland or forest to a friend or relative. This is consistent with the data reported in previous POFS Wales reports (2017-2023) where levels of satisfaction have been high.

Over half of respondents (58%) to the 2025 survey said there was a woodland or forest they could get to easily without using a car or other transport. However, this is a lower proportion than the survey recorded in 2017 where nearly two thirds (65%) of respondents said there was a woodland or forest they could get to easily without using a car or other transport. It is also the lowest proportion recorded over the last five survey points as shown in Figure 3.4 below.

Figure 3.4 Proportion of respondents with access to woodland without the use of a car or other transport 2017 to 2025
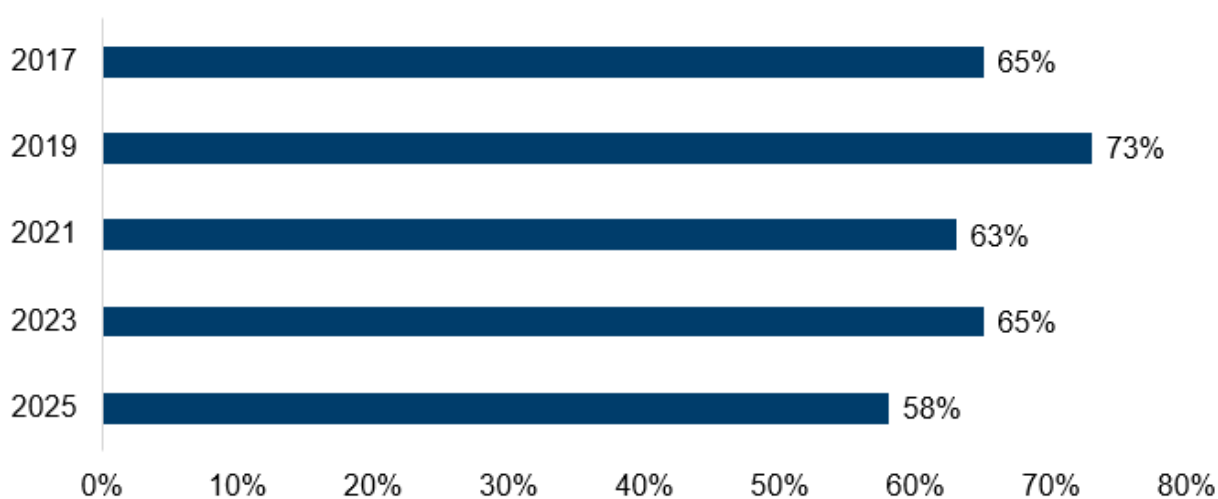
Source: Forest Research 2025

The methodology and sample size used for the POFS Wales does not enable any differences to be reported based on whether the survey respondent lives near to one of the National Forest for Wales sites.[footnote 3] However, survey results on the benefit areas identified by respondents suggest that there is a role for promoting the range of benefits people could experience from visiting forest and woodland sites. In the view of the evaluation team, this emphasises the positive contribution that the National Forest for Wales programme can provide to efforts to promote the benefits of forest and woodland sites and encourage more people to visit them.

3.3 How the National Forest is viewed by communities

This section of the report presents findings on community views on the National Forest as a concept for increasing woodlands in Wales. It explores whether these views have changed as the intervention has been rolled out.

3.3.1 Awareness of the National Forest for Wales Programme

With the exception of Mynydd Mawr Community Woods and Coed y Bont / Coed Dolgoed Community Woodland, based on on-site interviews with visitors, levels of awareness of the National Forest for Wales programme amongst visitors was low. The evaluation team engaged 83 visitors on-site across seven of the case study sites. Of the five case study sites where awareness of the National Forest was low, at four of the sites none of the visitors interviewed had heard of the National Forest for Wales programme. At Stackpole Woodland Estate, a small number of visitors had heard of the programme.

The views of these visitors are not necessarily representative of levels of awareness amongst the wider visitor base across these sites, however this suggests that further work is needed to support sites in raising awareness of the programme.

Where volunteers across case study sites indicated that they had heard about the programme, their knowledge of what it entailed was often limited.

Respondents to the community survey reported much higher levels of awareness. Some 53% of people responding to the community survey had heard about the National Forest for Wales (72/137 respondents). However, there is likely to be a response bias in the community survey findings given that site managers proactively promoted the survey using a range of channels and that respondents with greater connections to woodland sites may be more likely to respond to the survey. As such, these are not directly comparable to the findings from the on-site visitor interviews. Also, the community survey did not ask respondents to determine whether they were a visitor or volunteer so it is not possible to differentiate responses.

Nearly two thirds of community survey respondents (64% or 88/137) were not aware that the site that they had recently visited was part of the programme. This points to a need to

Footnotes
[3] The Public Opinion of Forestry Survey is a cross-sectional survey conducted online based on quota sampling. As such the findings do not imply population level findings.

support sites in raising awareness of the programme across their user groups, including visitors and volunteers.

More detailed analysis of the survey responses shows that people that had heard of the National Forest for Wales programme were more likely to be aware that the site that they had visited was part of the programme. Figure 3.5 over page shows that amongst those who had not heard of the National Forest Programme, 11% of respondents (7/65) knew that the site they were visiting was part of the programme, whilst amongst those who had heard of the programme this figure is 58% (42/72).

Figure 3.5: Awareness of the National Forest Programme Among Survey Respondents and Recognition of Visited Sites as Part of the Programme
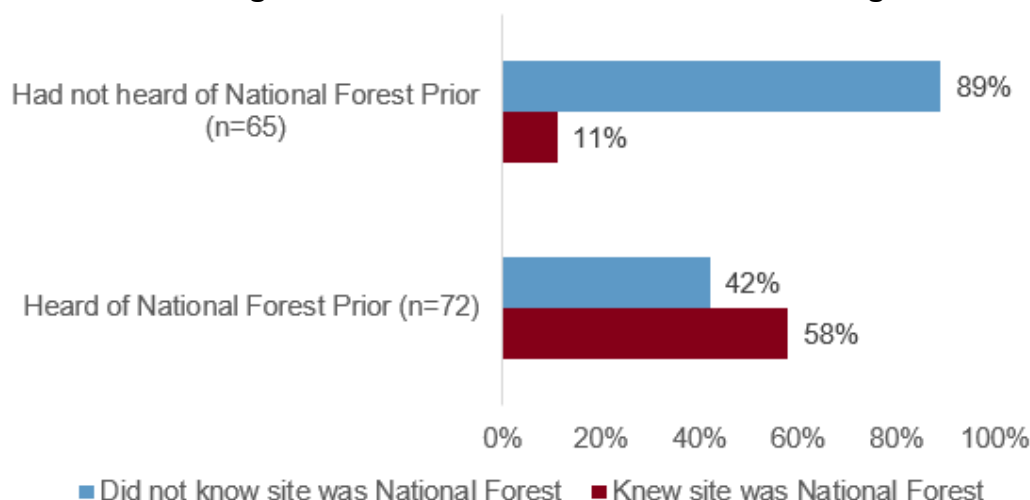
Source: Wavehill community survey.

Signage at the woodland site (45% or 33/74) or word of mouth (38% or 28/74) were the most common ways in which survey respondents heard about the programme. Only a small proportion (6% or 4/72) of respondents reported visiting the government website to learn about the programme.

To illustrate this point further, at four of the case study sites, a common theme raised by both visitors and volunteers interviewed was that more could be done to raise the programme's profile beyond the basic signage provided as part of joining the network. Suggestions included posters and information hosted on display boards and within facilities on site but also for site managers to share information through their respective social media channels.

3.3.2   Support for the concept of the National Forest for Wales

Whilst levels of awareness of the National Forest for Wales programme was low amongst visitors and volunteers interviewed on-site, there was a consensus of support for the concept of the National Forest for Wales as a way to plant trees or manage existing woodlands well when this was explained by the evaluation team.

This finding is supported by responses to the community survey. When asked for their views on the concept of the National Forest for Wales as a way to establish a nationwide network

of woodlands and forests throughout Wales under high-quality management, feedback from survey respondents (90% or 123/137) was overwhelmingly positive.

> "I think it is a brilliant idea. We need to preserve as much open space as possible where wildlife can flourish." Chirk Castle survey respondent

> "I think it is a good idea. High quality management is costly. Therefore, I hope the National Forest will be tied into the school curriculum, with classes visiting sites and a guide explaining habitats and their inhabitants. This would give back some kind of value by sensitising young people to the natural world." Porthkerry Country Park survey respondent

> "A very good way to ensure the future of a green forested Wales for generations to come as well as providing beautiful community spaces for the present." Naturewise Community Forest Garden survey respondent

> "I think it is an excellent idea. Certainly, it would enhance wild flora and fauna within Wales. Quality management will help as neglected woodlands are a sad eyesore." Mynydd Mawr Community Woods survey respondent

3.4 Experiences of communities so far with National Forest sites

Site visit interviews and focus groups and the community survey were used to explore and understand communities' experiences so far with National Forest sites.

3.4.1 Community involvement and governance

The National Forest Evidence Review commissioned by Welsh Government emphasises the substantial body of evidence which suggests that enabling and facilitating the involvement of local communities in the governance of woodlands, and specifically community woodlands, leads to considerable social benefits in the form of social capital (encompassing trust, a sense of belonging and community cohesion).

The report states that the evidence from Wales suggests that communities still feel excluded from the governance of 'Public Forests.' [footnote 4] Community involvement in woodlands is one of the six National Forest for Wales outcomes.

Direct involvement of communities in the design and planning of the woodland management or activities delivered at woodland sites is included in the Status Scheme Guidance as one of the ways in which communities may be involved.

The community survey included a question on whether people had been consulted about plans for managing the woodland site they visited. The majority of people responding to the community survey (84% or 114/136) indicated that they had never been consulted about plans for managing the woodland site they visited. Just over a third of community survey respondents (38% or 28/74) indicated that they would like to be consulted in the future. In

---

Footnotes

[4] In the context of the National Forest in Wales Evidence Review: Benefits to Society report this means the Welsh Government Woodland Estate.

the view of the evaluation team, this highlights the potential for site managers to gain the views of and possibly support from communities to assist them in driving forward their woodland management plans.

3.4.2   Changes observed since sites joined the Status Scheme

Most people responding to the community survey had been visiting their site for over 2 years (85% 117/137) and so were well placed to provide their views and experiences of any changes they had seen since the site joined the Status Scheme. One of the questions in the community survey asked respondents to report on the main changes they had observed at the site they had visited. Respondents were able to select more than one option.

The main reported changes observed by community survey respondents were paths being made more accessible (45% or 56/124), trees being planted (29% or 36/124), trees being removed (25% or 31/124) and an increase in volunteer activities (23% or 28/124). Four of the case study sites, namely Naturewise Community Forest Garden, Porthkerry Country Park, Sirhowy Hill Woodland and Stackpole Woodland Estate, have received funding through TWIG. TWIG funding provides support for woodland creation, enhancement, and restoration and as such it is likely that these changes have been funded through this grant at these specific sites.

At Sirhowy Hill Woodland, for example, grant funding through TWIG has helped to improve the facilities, making the site more accessible and based on feedback from site staff and volunteers, more attractive for the local community to use. This has included the installation of a wheelchair accessible pathway through the woodland and a new permanent toilet facility, the creation of a dedicated area to prepare food as part of workshops with local schools and community groups, and the fitting of solar panels to provide a renewable energy source for the forest school cabins.

Further detail on the main changes observed by community survey respondents across all case study sites is provided in Figure 3.6.

Figure 3.6 Main changes observed by community survey respondents

Change	Percentage
Paths have been made more accessible	45%
Planting of trees	29%
Removal of trees	25%
Increased volunteer activities	23%
Visitor facilities have been improved	14%
Activities have been offered on site that were not previously available	14%
Improved connectivity	10%
Improved conservation methods or biodiversity	10%
Increased training or skills sessions available	7%
More research visible on the site	2%
Other (Please state below)	0%

Source: Wavehill community survey. N= 124

Across three of the case study sites, a small number of visitors interviewed on-site reported their appreciation of any work that was being delivered to make their woodland site accessible for everyone. Two of the sites where this was mentioned have secured TWIG funding which is supporting the creation of accessible paths, the installation of bench seating, and the creation of nature trails.

These observed changes reported by community survey respondents are positive given that the National Forest Evidence Review suggests accessibility is one of the main barriers faced in engaging with woodlands, in particular for older people with mobility issues and disabled people. Having clear and accessible tracks and paths is also one of the top five reasons (44% of respondents) for choosing to visit woodlands as reported in the 2025 POFS Wales findings. This focus on accessibility aligns with a key objective of the National Forest for Wales programme, which aims to ensure 'woodlands are accessible to people'.

Only a small proportion of visitors interviewed on-site across the eight case study sites were able to point to any specific changes that they had observed since the site had joined the Status Scheme. Where changes were noted, for two sites (Spirit of Llynfi Woodlands and Mynydd Mawr Community Woods) this related to new signage and for one site (Mynydd Mawr Community Woods) tree felling.

Commonly, visitors who had been long-time users (over 2 years) of the sites were unsure exactly when any changes on sites were undertaken which meant they were unable to attribute this to the time since the site had joined the Status Scheme.

3.4.3   Recreational activities available at sites

The majority of on-site visits were conducted by the evaluation team across September and early October 2025. One consequence of the timing of these on-site visits is that they did not coincide with any events or activities hosted by sites over the summer months, which may have provided opportunity to interview visitors directly engaged in organised recreational activities. As a result, nearly all visitors engaged on-site across the eight sites were general walkers or dog walkers which limited the ability of the evaluation to explore experiences of other recreational activities on sites. However, interviews with site managers and a review of the case study site's respective websites provides detail on a range of both organised and self-directed recreational activities hosted and supported at sites.

The community survey disseminated by sites asked visitors what recreational activities they undertake at the National Forest for Wales site they visited. Survey respondents were able to choose more than one option. From the 137 responses received, the most common responses were walking (82%), dog walking (64%) and wildlife watching (64%). However, the findings from the community survey shows that across the eight case study sites, people are taking part in a wide range of activities which also includes running (12%), cycling (9%), woodland crafts (8%), and fishing (1%). Where respondents answered 'other,' this mainly included volunteering activities but also foraging and horse riding. Further detail is provided in Figure 3.7.

Figure 3.7 Recreational activities undertaken across case study sites
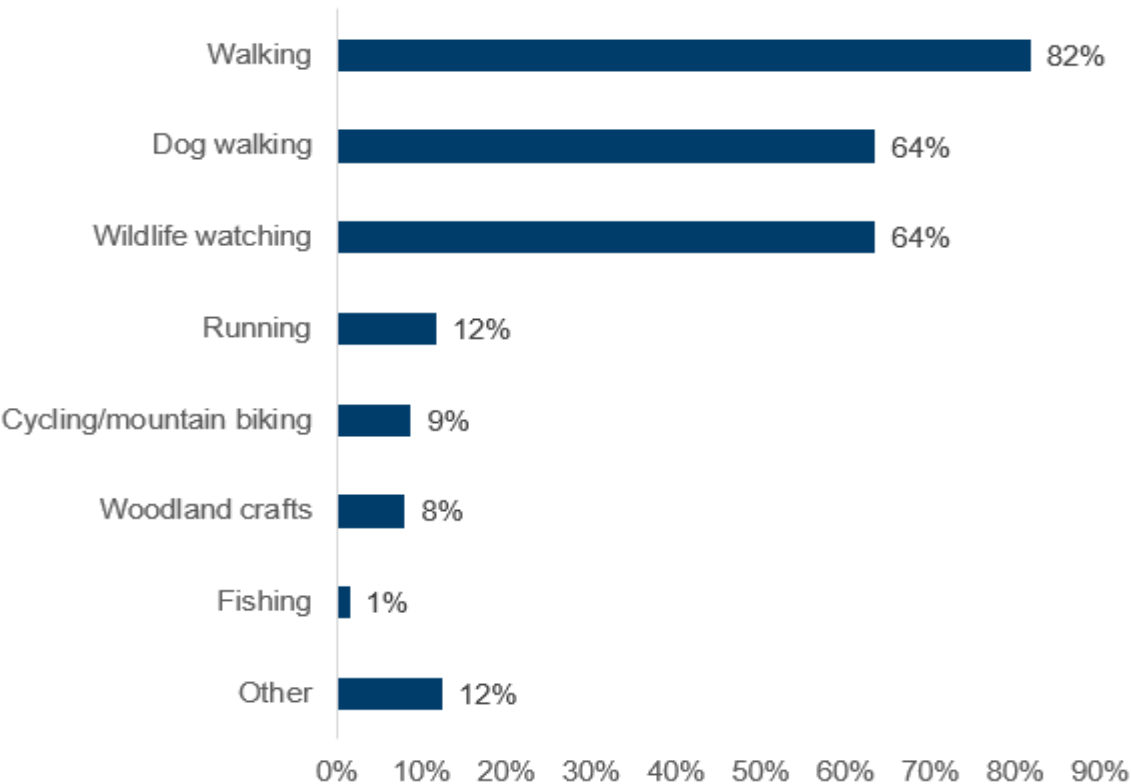
Source: Wavehill community survey. N= 137

In the view of the evaluation team, this illustrates the contribution that the individual sites are making to policy areas relating to getting people active and adopting healthy lifestyles. Further research could assess the scale of contribution to healthy lifestyles across the network of 72 Status Scheme sites, which is explored in further detail in the next section of this report.

3.4.4   Volunteer roles and opportunities

It was evident from the site visits undertaken by the evaluation team that all of the eight sites are strongly supported by volunteers. By way of example, the management of Coed y Bont, a 60-acre woodland owned by NRW is helped by Coed y Bont Community Woodland Association, a group of volunteers which was established in 2008. The Naturewise Community Forest Garden, which is managed by Naturewise CIC, has a regular pool of volunteers who meet every Tuesday and the third Saturday of the month and undertake a range of tasks to support the management of the site.

Interviews with site staff and interviews and focus groups with volunteers across seven of the case study sites suggests this volunteer resource is enabling these case study sites to undertake a range of woodland management and community engagement activities, whilst also providing benefits for the volunteers themselves.

> "The rangers always give us the message that we're helping to maintain the standard in the estate. It's important that footpaths are kept open, and we can help do that more regularly." Chirk Castle volunteer focus group

The important role of volunteers in supporting the objectives of the National Forest for Wales programme is illustrated at Sirhowy Hill Woodlands, a community woodland covering around 85 hectares near Tredegar in Blaenau Gwent. The volunteer team offer a variety of commercial services including timber extraction, thinning, orchard/woodland work, coppicing and felling, firewood generation, pruning, strimming, scrub clearance, vegetation clearance and milling. The woodland also has a volunteer-staffed shop selling assorted products like fire starter kits/firewood, chopping boards and cladding.

The Sirhowy Hill Woodland site provides a useful model for other woodland sites on how to generate revenue through an onsite shop which is supported by volunteers. As outlined by site staff, the revenue from the shop is reinvested to support the future management and maintenance of the woodland. Revenue is also generated through people buying memorial benches, tree dedications and memberships for the woodland. Based on interviews with site staff, the breadth of volunteer roles available at Sirhowy Hill have also served as a springboard for some volunteers to move into paid employment drawing on the woodland management and forestry skills acquired through the volunteer role.

Volunteers from Sirhowy Hill Woodland have also provided wider benefits for the local community beyond the woodland, for example using their skills to create raised beds for community gardens and growing within local neighbourhoods. Based on interviews with volunteers on-site, this has also helped to raise the profile of the woodlands and the recreational opportunities they present for local people.

At Mynydd Mawr Community Woods, a former colliery site located in Carmarthenshire, an active Friends Group maintains the site. On-site interviews with volunteers highlighted that they undertake activities including vegetation clearance, control of invasive plants, path and infrastructure installation and maintenance. The volunteers also organise outdoor activities such as guided walks and activity trails for children and have links with local organisations including Keep Mynydd Mawr Tidy, Cwm Gwendraeth Early Years Team and Tumble Family Centre.

At Naturewise Community Forest Garden, volunteers support the site by managing an Eco shop located on a nearby industrial estate. The shop sells a range of second-hand good and provides around £12,000 per annum which helps fund the management of the community forest garden.

Volunteer involvement at Status Scheme sites has the potential to directly contribute to a number of the National Forest for Wales outcomes, particularly those that rely on volunteers to provide a range of recreational and learning opportunities. As evidenced across the case study sites, volunteers are also supporting the mandatory outcome of 'Good quality, well designed and managed resilient woodlands.'

However, based on on-site interviews and focus groups with volunteers, when asked if they were aware whether their volunteer work had likely supported the site in contributing to the wider National Forest for Wales programme outcomes, volunteers commonly reported not being aware of this. This was evident in feedback from volunteers to the Chirk Castle estate and the Stackpole Woodland Estate. This may highlight an opportunity to raise awareness of the National Forest for Wales programme and feedback to volunteers on the importance of their contribution.

3.4.5   Information and interpretation

On-site interviews with visitors and volunteers at Chirk Castle, Spirit of Llynfi Woodland and Coed y Bont (Dolgoed) suggested that the National Forest for Wales was not always prominent in the websites of the respective sites. All visitors and volunteers interviewed at these sites suggested that it would be helpful to promote the National Forest for Wales programme via the online channels used by site managers to aid efforts to raise wide public awareness about the initiative.

By way of example, details of the Chirk Castle estate are available via the National Trust website which promotes the 480 acres of woodland, meadow and tenanted grassland and opportunities for visitors to discover 'a landscape full of ancient trees, wild flowers, birds and insects'. However, following a review by the evaluation team, it was found that the webpage content currently makes no reference to the National Forest for Wales even though the site joined the Status Scheme in September 2024. [footnote 5]

A further theme evident in on-site interviews with visitors at Mynydd Mawr Community Woods and Stackpole Woodland Estate was the appetite for further information on habitats,

---

Footnotes
[5] Webpage accessed on the 15th October 2025.

conservation work and woodland management approaches, including within suitably located interpretation boards. This work is underway at Stackpole Woodland Estate as part of the ongoing TWIG grant. Porthkerry Country Park and Sirhowy Hill Woodland are also benefiting from TWIG grant funding which is supporting improvements to signage and interpretation at the sites.

3.5 Benefits for communities delivered by National Forest sites

One of the objectives for Phase 2 of the evaluation was to explore and understand the benefits for communities delivered by National Forest sites. Previous research has outlined the potential benefits available through woodland and forest sites. The National Forest Evidence Review commissioned by Welsh Government, presents evidence of the wider social and cultural benefits and disadvantages potentially offered by woodlands. The evidence review report points to a substantial body of evidence about the links between engagement with trees, woods and forests, and people's mental health and wellbeing, and physical health. The report also highlights examples of woodland initiatives that aim to address health inequalities and have targeted particular groups in society, including those least active, those with a range of mental health conditions, or those living in deprived areas.

Interviews and focus groups at site visits and the community survey administered for this evaluation were used to learn about the benefits delivered for people and communities across the eight case study sites. Whilst these sites are not necessarily representative of the 72 sites that comprise the National Forest for Wales programme, the following sub-sections illustrate the benefits reported by volunteers and visitors. These findings highlight the value of capturing evidence from a much broader range of sites as part of any future impact measurement approach for the programme. Further details on this are provided in the next section of this report.

3.5.1   Benefits gained from visiting National Forest for Wales sites

People responding to the community survey were asked what benefits, if any, they had experienced from their visit to the woodland site. Respondents were able to select more than one benefit. The responses show the wide range of benefits gained from visiting their National Forest for Wales site. Whilst improved physical health (85% or 115/136) and improved mental health (84% or 114/136) were the most prevalent benefits reported, responses show the breadth of benefits derived from visiting the woodland and forest sites. Just over two thirds (68% or 92/136) of community survey respondents stated that their woodland or forest site improved their overall quality of life. Figure 3.8 over page provides further detail.

Figure 3.8 Benefits of visiting a National Forest site reported by community survey respondents

Benefit	Percentage
Improved my physical health	85%
Improved my mental health	84%
Improved my overall quality of life	68%
Provided space for me to have fun with my friends and/or family	66%
Helped me to learn about the environment	38%
Provided opportunities for me to meet new people	29%
Provided opportunities for me to take part in a range of recreational or cultural activities	24%
Other	4%
I don't think I've gained any benefits	1%

Source: Wavehill community survey. N= 136

In the view of the evaluation team, this provides an indication that the National Forest for Wales programme is contributing to a range of national policy objectives including the Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015) well-being goals and the Environment Act (Wales) 2016.

Community survey respondents were also asked about the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a range of statements about forests and woodlands. The responses showed strong agreement with the statements 'they are important places for wildlife' (89% or 119/134), 'they are places where people can relax and destress' (83% or 109/132), 'they make areas nicer places to live' (83% 111/134), 'they are places where people can exercise and keep fit' (82% or 111/135) and 'they are places where people can have fun and enjoy themselves' (77% or 103/134). Further detail is provided in Figure 3.9.

Figure 3.9 Areas of strong agreement with statements about forests and woodlands
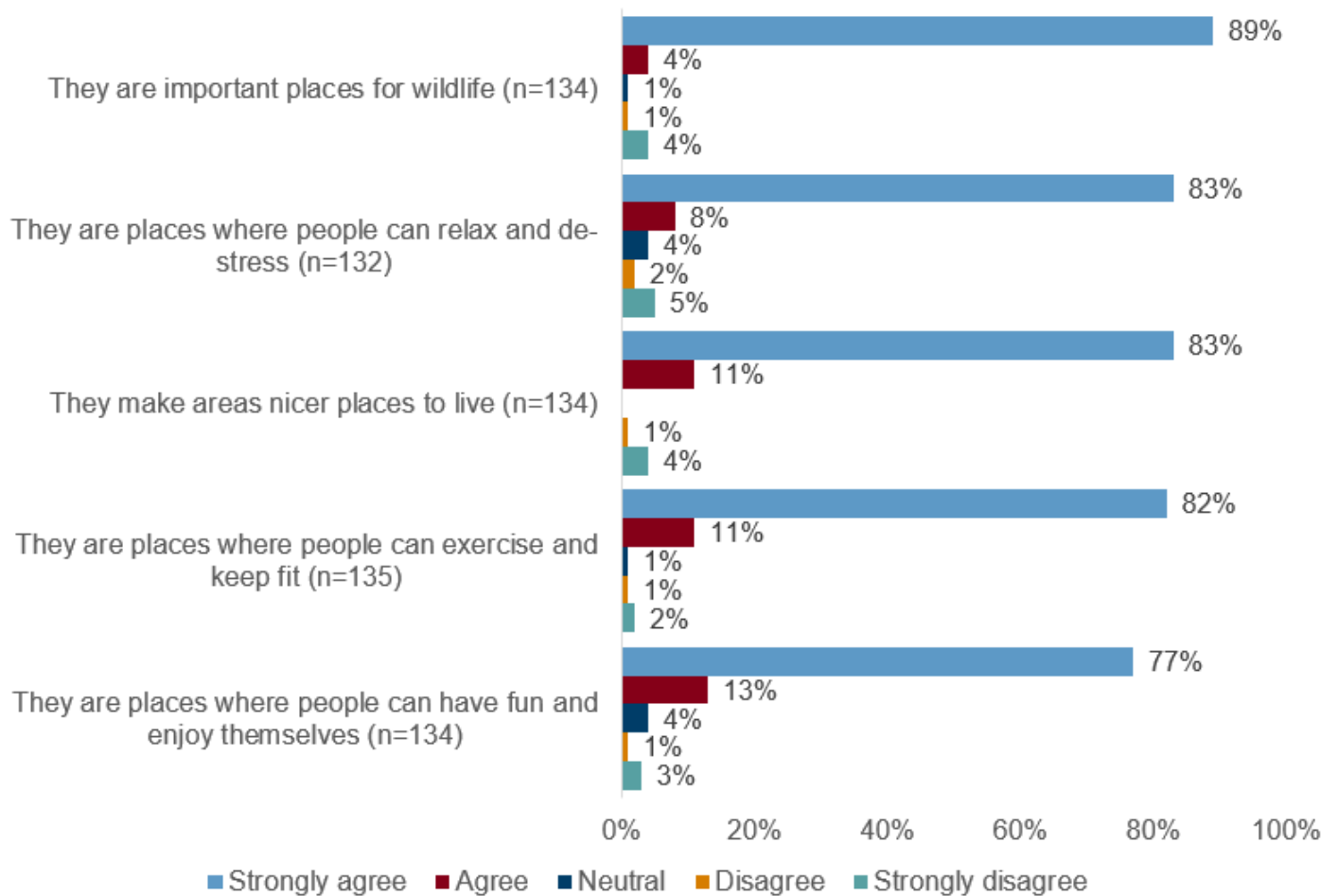
Source: Wavehill community survey. N= 136

There were very few areas where people disagreed with the statements which illustrates the positive benefits that survey respondents associate with woodland and forest sites. The responses which show areas of agreement with the statements are provided in Figure 3.10.

Figure 3.10 Wider areas of agreement with statements about forests and woodlands
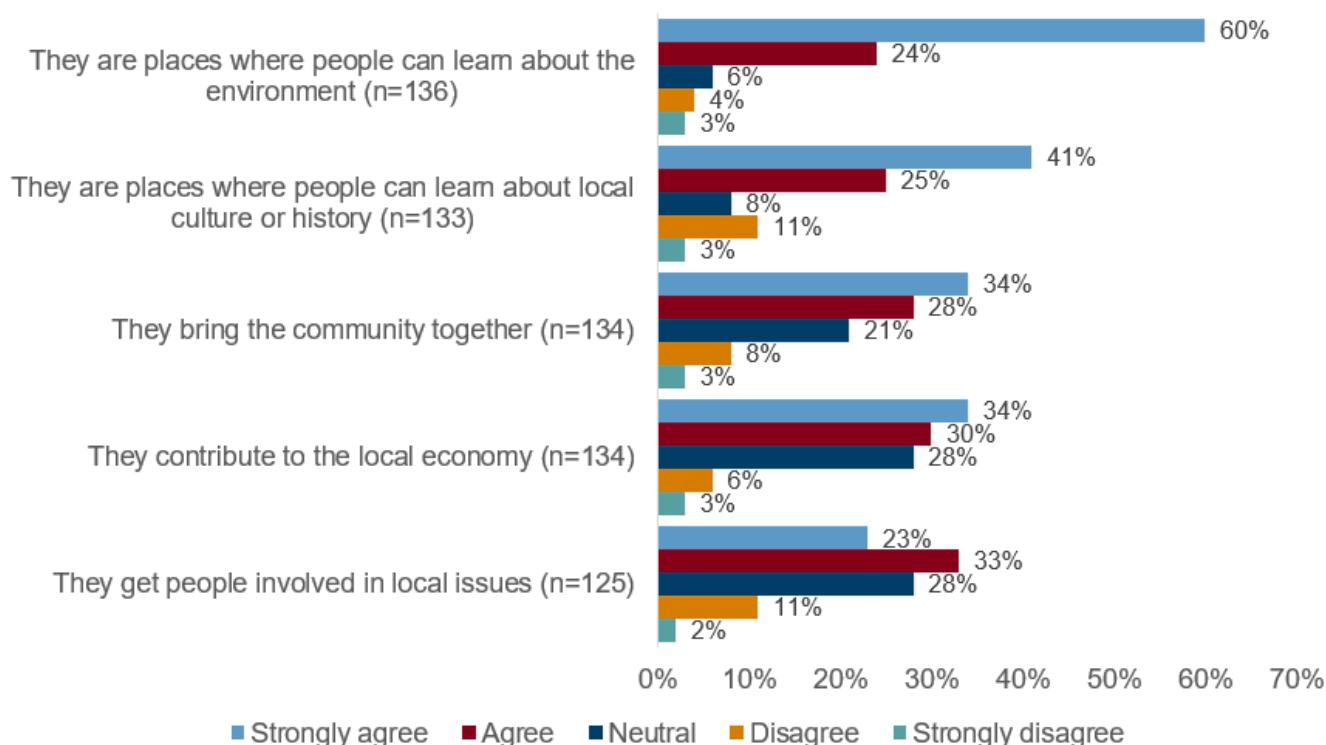
Description of Figure 3.10: A bar chart showing wider areas of agreements with statements about forest and woodlands from survey respondents. The chart shows levels of agreement that as positive but less strong than those shown in Figure 3.9.

Source: Wavehill community survey. N= 136

The survey findings show that there was generally the greatest level of agreement with statements surrounding the importance to the environment and recreational benefits including those related to physical health and wellbeing. There was slightly less strong agreement about the role of forests and trees to the communities and local economy. This may indicate the kinds of benefits that could be promoted further by the programme in the future.

The main benefits from visiting National Forest for Wales sites reported by the 83 visitors engaged on-site by the evaluation team were improvements to their health and wellbeing. Visitors described both intrinsic benefits [footnote 6] derived from spending time within woodland sites and connecting with nature and instrumental benefits [footnote 7] gained from taking part in organised activity or learning new skills.

Footnotes

[6] Intrinsic benefits are the internal, intangible rewards that come from the act of doing something itself, such as a sense of accomplishment, personal growth, or satisfaction.
[7] Instrumental benefits are the practical advantages or useful outcomes gained from something, for example gaining experience and skills to help get a job.

"I meet people here, I've met a lot of elderly people here who are really lonely but when they walk here they meet other walkers and sometimes have an opportunity to chat." Mynydd Mawr Community Woods visitor

"It is wonderful castle and gardens to visit but the best thing for me is the availability of the woods and walks 24 hrs a day and free access. My dogs love it and it has really improved their and mine quality of life, health wise and mentally." Chirk Castle community survey respondent

"My toddler loves it here, she can splash in puddles, look at nature, the fairy doors are fab she loves finding them and the fairies. It's good for my wellbeing too, just getting outside for a couple of hours in a lovely setting." Mynydd Mawr Community Woods visitor

Financial investment in sites was recognised by visitors across all sites as important to improve both their contribution to biodiversity and habitat restoration objectives but also in providing a resource for communities to connect with nature.

"The site is amazing. The before pictures where it was a just a field and bracken and now you have this site that has different nature areas, ponds, wild meadow, orchards, community growing areas is great and the site is really accessible and has all the facilities so anybody can visit." Naturewise visitor

3.5.2 Case study: Engaging people with support needs at Mynydd Mawr Community Woods

Mynydd Mawr Community Woods is used as a venue for external organisations. These include Tir Coed and Coed Lleol who deliver a range of outdoor training, woodland and nature based activities which are focused on supporting learning, health and wellbeing outcomes for communities. Along with the active Friends Group who support the site, these organisations are the catalyst for community engagement, working alongside the local authority rangers who support educational and engagement activities.

Coed Lleol have a track record of reaching and working with people from the community who may be struggling and vulnerable. Staff interviewed by the evaluation team emphasised that their work at the Woodland Park can be transformative for these individuals by building their confidence, resilience and encouraging them to seek out further opportunities in their community. This has included one participant who took part in their training who them progressed into a volunteer role and was now in the process of becoming a paid activity leader at the woodland site.

3.5.3 Benefits delivered in partnership with external organisations

At four of the case study sites, the evaluation team interviewed external organisations who were actively working in partnership with sites, including the delivery of activities and services to target groups within the community. Based on on-site interviews with site staff and volunteers, all these organisations were helping sites to extend their reach into their

respective communities whilst also maximising the use of the facilities available on sites to support a range of social impacts.

The case study examples presented below provide valuable learning. They illustrate the breadth of impact on communities that National Forest sites can have. This includes working in partnership with organisations who are engaging and supporting a range of people, including those who may be underrepresented in the profile of visitors to woodland and forest sites. Further examples are evident across the wider network of Status Scheme sites as evidenced in their applications to join the National Forest for Wales network.

3.5.4 Case study: Working with partners at Porthkerry Country Park

At Porthkerry Country Park, the Ranger Team has been working with Innovate Trust for over eight years. Innovate Trust is a supported living provider that works with disabled people to support them to achieve independence. They offer opportunities for the people they support to engage in conservation tasks and acquire environmental skills through various activities and training programmes.

The Woodland Management Plan for Porthkerry Country Park includes a commitment to improving the accessibility of the site and supporting volunteer roles. The site rangers have facilitated weekly sessions with Innovate Trust with the staff valuing the quality of the conversation activities and opportunities enabled:

> "They set proper appropriate tasks for our people, real jobs the rangers need help with not just tick box things." Interview with representative from Innovate Trust

In the view of the evaluation team, the work at Porthkerry Country Park with Innovate Trust is an example of what is being done at sites to promote inclusion and contribute to health and wellbeing of individuals involved. This may also highlight the opportunities to contribute to inclusion, health and wellbeing objectives at a larger scale, should similar approaches be adopted across the National Forest to partner with organisations across Wales who also support disabled people across Wales. Staff from Innovate Trust emphasised the positive impact of their work with Porthkerry Country Park for the people they support. They report that the volunteering roles have enabled the people they support to gain a range of skills (e.g. gardening, communication, time management) as well as delivering a range of mental and physical health benefits. The volunteering roles have had a strong focus on social interaction, which the staff reported helped the people they support to develop new friendships.

3.5.5 Case Study: Creating opportunities for learning at Naturewise Community Forest Garden

A further example of the benefits of partnership working for communities is presented at the Naturewise Community Forest Garden in Cardigan. The site hosts a range of organisations that are working with and supporting local communities. This includes The Lighthouse, a self-directed and consent-based learning project for children aged seven and above based at the Forest Garden within the site and Ein Cegin a community based kitchen which works

to increase access to sustainably produced food through practical community cooking workshops.

The site is also used by the [Flying Start programme](#) which supports families with young children under four in disadvantaged areas of Wales. Staff from Flying Start reported that the families they support can relax in an outdoor space such as the Naturewise Community Forest Garden site as it is less formal and young children have the space to run around. They also emphasised that many of the families who are supported by their service do not have their own gardens so their work on the site provides an important opportunity for families to connect with nature. Naturewise Community Forest Garden also hosts groups of children from local schools who have participated in tree planting activities and have learnt about the importance of the natural environment and biodiversity.

In the view of the evaluation team, these activities taking place at Naturewise Community Forest Garden support a range of policy objectives including supporting adult and children's mental wellbeing, tackling poverty and increasing volunteering.

3.5.6   Case Study: Using a Citizen Science approach at Sirhowy Hill Woodlands

There is also evidence from the site visit undertaken at Sirhowy Hill Woodlands who are working with [Buglife](#), which is a charity dedicated to the conservation of all invertebrates. They deliver a range of projects which have focused on restoring and enhancing habitats including work within woodlands. The charity has established a partnership with Sirhowy Hill Woodlands group as part of their work on coal spoil sites.

This work has involved local people undertaking bug surveys, which in turn has supported the charity in learning about important species such as the Maerdy millipede, dubbed the '[Maerdy Monster'](#). Staff from Buglife reported that the participation of the local community has helped to educate people about the biodiversity of Sirhowy Hill Woodland and other woodland sites.

Buglife Cymru have partnered with a local artist at Sirhowy Hill Woodlands to make a book for children called 'the great bug life rescue' to educate local children about the biodiversity in their area. The work at Sirhowy Hill Woodlands highlights the benefits of sites engaging communities using a Citizen Science approach, the outputs from which are generating data to support future conservation work.

In the view of the evaluation team, encouraging and supporting Status Scheme sites to use a Citizen Science approach can support the [national milestone in Wales to reverse the decline in biodiversity](#) with an improvement in the status of species and ecosystems by 2030 and their clear recovery by 2050.

Citizen Science as an approach can provide capacity and skills to capture data to aid understanding about the status of species in a woodland or forest site. The use of this data can inform future work and approaches to support species recovery both across Status Scheme sites and within woodland and forest sites in Wales more broadly. As evidenced in their applications to join the National Forest for Wales network, many of the Status Scheme

sites are already using a Citizen Science approach, which demonstrates the likely collective contribution of the programme to biodiversity and species recovery objectives.

3.5.7 Benefits delivered for volunteers

All of the case study sites host and support volunteers. There is a growing body of evidence on the benefits of volunteering for individuals (health, wellbeing, social connections) and for communities (pride in place, social cohesion) (Davies and others, 2024). It is likely that the work by the sites to create a diverse range of volunteering and visiteering [footnote 8] opportunities is directly contributing to the target in Wales to increase the percentage of people who volunteer by 10% by 2050, which is one of the 7 national wellbeing goals outlined in the Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015).

Chirk Castle, which is located in the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), is managed by the National Trust and supported by two volunteer groups. The first is Chester National Trust volunteers who are a well-established and experienced group of volunteers that carry out habitat works at National Trust sites in the North West of England and South East Wales. They operate once a week, rotating their activities across different sites including Chirk Castle.

A second, smaller group of regular volunteers contribute 2-3 days a week to activity at the site. The volunteers from Chester National Trust volunteer group see their work as a 'green gym,' [footnote 9] meeting regularly to contribute to the site. Interviews undertaken with volunteers on-site highlight that they particularly value the social aspect of their work and have gained considerable pride in contributing to the management of the woodland site.

Coed y Bont (Dolgoed) is owned by Welsh Government and managed by NRW who have established a community management agreement with Coed y Bont Community Woodland Association. The site supports a pool of volunteers who undertake a range of maintenance and restoration tasks on-site.

There was consensus amongst the volunteers interviewed by the evaluation team that their motivations for being involved at the site were to give back to their local community but also to benefit from the social connections with other volunteers. The next section of this report provides suggestions on ways to capture data on the work of volunteers across Status Scheme sites and to measure the benefits experienced from their volunteer role.

Footnotes

[8] Visiteering refers to a flexible, short-term style of volunteering that visitors can do while at a location, often on the same day. It is often described as a form of "micro-volunteering" because it requires a limited time commitment and is integrated into a visit.

[9] A "Green Gym" is an outdoor exercise program that involves community members participating in practical conservation and environmental activities, such as planting trees, gardening, or woodland management. It aims to improve participants' physical and mental health and wellbeing while simultaneously enhancing local green spaces.

3.6 Aspirations and suggestions for future delivery

There was a consensus of support across all site staff interviewed by the evaluation for future opportunities to connect with and learn from the wider network of sites within the Status Scheme. This is already happening through the National Forest for Wales Network which runs online and in-person events specifically to enable sites to learn from each other and from wider research and comparable programmes from across the UK. Four sites made specific reference to valuing continuing support and guidance from the Woodland Liaison Team – whose support includes facilitating this network.

During interviews, two site managers indicated that they are actively looking to invest further in the visitor facilities available at their sites, for example, creating mountain bike trails. Three of the sites have ongoing TWIG projects which, when completed, will improve facilities at these sites such as creating accessible paths or installing new visitor facilities such as toilets. All site managers stated that they were also exploring options to develop their enterprise activities and income streams to help them resource the delivery of their woodland management plans.

Interviews with site staff at The Spirit of Llynfi Woodland, which is located on the site of the former Coegnant Colliery and Maesteg Washery, indicated that they felt they were limited in their visitor offer by the lack of toilet facilities and poor car parking. Whilst the site aspires to expand the range of events and activities offered to benefit local communities, investment was needed to improve its visitor facilities.

The site, which is part of the Welsh Government Woodland Estate, is now managed by Friends of Llynfi under an agreement that shifts management from Natural Resources Wales to the volunteer group. The site has recently been awarded the Green Flag Community Award which is a benchmark for parks and green spaces which are managed by volunteers. However, the absence of suitable facilities means that they are unable to host school visits and volunteer activities are limited to 2 hours. Whilst the site offers regular volunteer sessions, including drop-in sessions, site staff interviewed reported how they have struggled to maintain and grow their volunteer numbers, which directly impacts on the capacity available to manage the site including involving the local community in the woodland. This highlights that some sites within the Status Scheme may require future funding and support to enable them to realise their potential as an asset for local communities or strengthen the positive impact they're already having. One of the National Forest for Wales programme mechanisms that has supported sites to improve their facilities as part of their journey to join the Status Scheme is TWIG funding. However, future funding potentially required by sites may not necessarily be provided through the National Forest for Wales programme but through the work of sites to identify and secure alternative sources of financial support to enable them to continue to invest in their woodland.

Aspirations and suggestions for future delivery were one of the questions included within the community survey disseminated by site managers as part of the evaluation. Community survey respondents were asked what else they would like to see at the woodland site. Responses were received from 103 of the 137 survey respondents. The responses were varied which likely reflects the diversity of the case study sites.

The top six most frequent suggestions provided centred around improvements to visitor facilities, most notably seating areas (n=10), bird hides or shelters (n=9), facilities to support the hosting of events and community activities (n=7), dog waste bins (n=6), footpath maintenance (n=6), and improved bridleways including for horse riders (n=5). The below quotes illustrate some of the improvements, respondents would like to see.

> "I would like to see more sustainable seating areas to rest as I am disabled and places which are good for observing wildlife. Also a small, covered area to shelter from the rain with seating made from natural materials that will blend with the environment." Spirit of Llynfi Woodlands community survey respondent

> "Nest boxes for a whole range of birds, not only small ones, but also for species like kestrels and barn owls. Also, a notice board announcing activities in the park such as tree planting, litter picking or guided nature walks would be helpful. I only find out about things like litter picking sessions after they happened, when they are reported on in the local paper." Porthkerry Country Park community survey respondent

Whilst some respondents were keen for their sites to include more signage, way markers and information boards (n=13), two respondents were keen for these to be limited to ensure that sites are retained as natural spaces to enjoy nature.

> "Better signage for people to know where it is and how to get here and information boards to tell people about the woodland and wildlife." Sirhowy Hill Woodland community survey respondent

A small number of respondents (n=3) expressed a desire for sites to facilitate the introduction of lost species such as pine martens or wild boar.

3.7 Future opportunities

The combined evidence captured from on-site engagement with staff, visitors, volunteers and external organisations, along with the community survey responses across the eight case study sites, illustrates the broad range of benefits generated by the woodland and forests that have joined the Status Scheme. Whilst the case study sites are not necessarily representative of the benefits delivered by all Status Scheme sites, they do indicate that the National Forest of Wales Programme is providing a diverse range of positive benefits for people and their respective communities.

In the view of the evaluation team, the evidence generated through the case study site visits suggests that there is a range of options and opportunities for building on the existing work with communities evident across the case study sites. One of the most recurring themes emerging from the case study site visits was the importance of sharing practice, learning and knowledge across the programme to support sites in managing their woodlands. This is already in place through the National Forest for Wales Network. Effective sharing of knowledge and best practice can aid sites individually and the programme collectively in delivering against the National Forest for Wales high-level outcomes and the national milestones for Wales.

Whilst all case study sites host and are supported by volunteers, concerns were raised during interviews with all site managers and volunteers themselves around increasing challenges in recruiting volunteers who provide important capacity to aid woodland management. In the view of the evaluation team, one opportunity for the National Forest for Wales programme is to ensure that Status Scheme sites have a profile on the Volunteering Wales platform, which helps organisations promote volunteer opportunities. This could be taken forward by promoting the platform directly to sites through the National Forest for Wales Network or by exploring options for the National Forest for Wales programme to profile the sites directly with the platform.

In light of the strong emphasis on supporting volunteers' and visitors' health and wellbeing, there are also opportunities for Status Scheme sites to be promoted on the Dewis Cymru website, which is a website which helps people find information about organisations and services that can help them take control of their own well-being.

More generally, feedback captured during site visits and through the community survey highlighted the importance of resourcing and supporting ongoing promotional work for the programme as a whole and individual sites within the Status Scheme. Although sites have access to a wide range of support from their WLO and resources, including signage and information boards, professional photography and video footage and free promotion via Visit Wales, continued promotional work is likely to be required to assist the sites in attracting both volunteers and visitors.

Interviews with the site managers outlined a range of opportunities in terms of improving the visitor facilities on site or introducing new enterprise activities to generate income to support the delivery of management plans – see section 3.6. However, the ability to realise these opportunities was dependent on the availability of funding support such as provided by TWIG which is part of the National Forest for Wales programme or from outside of the programme.

3.8 Stakeholder views on the National Forest for Wales

Building on stakeholder perceptions on the National Forest for Wales reported in the Phase 1 report, the evaluation team completed a small number (n=7) of interviews between July and August 2025 with stakeholders involved in forestry policy and practice in Wales. These included representatives from Forest Research, National Trust, Bangor University, Stump Up for Trees, Carmarthenshire County Council, Pembrokeshire County Council and the Vale of Glamorgan Council.

The purpose of these interviews was to explore views on what the National Forest for Wales programme is trying to achieve and the concept of the National Forest as a way to plant trees or manage existing woodlands well. There was a consensus of support across these stakeholders for the establishment of a nationwide network of woodland and forests throughout Wales under high-quality management.

Feedback from all stakeholders involved in forestry policy and practice in Wales undertaken in Phase 2 highlighted a desire for further information and insight on how the programme is operating and the range of benefits it is enabling, both at a site level and at a network level.

In practice, the network of 72 sites [footnote 10] are delivering benefits for communities and for nature and habitats which they set out in their application form for National Forest for Wales Status. This finding is supported by the assessment of the Status Scheme applications which, as outlined in the Phase 1 report, determined that 93% of the 55 non-WGWE sites were assessed as meeting all non-mandatory outcomes. There was strong support for the sharing of learning across the network of sites, both to continue to underpin their quality management, but also to support advocacy efforts to showcase the value and contribution of the programme to a range of policy areas.

Stakeholders had different levels of involvement with the programme, and so the degree of awareness of the progress that the programme had made varied. For those more familiar with the programme, the general sense was that progress has been positive since 2022, with the National Forest for Wales network continuing to build both momentum and profile. Those who reported being less familiar suggested that the programme would benefit from stronger communications activity to increase awareness of the growth of the network.

Stakeholders were asked about their views on what the delivery of the National Forest for Wales programme should look like post-2025. Mixed views were expressed on whether the programme should focus on consolidating the existing network or whether it should continue to expand the number of sites, although not all expressed a firm view either way. Where stakeholders did express a view, there was a degree of uncertainty on whether a continued expansion of the network would reduce the level of support that existing sites could receive from the WLO team. In the view of the evaluation team, this is an area that would benefit from clarification given the capacity and management implications for the WLO team associated with pursuing either continued expansion or consolidation.

A common theme raised to varying degrees in all the stakeholder interviews centred on the availability of resources to support existing sites in managing their woodlands well or prospective sites in undertaking remedial work to get them to a position where they could apply to join the network (e.g. addressing any necessary tree felling or clearing existing paths to ensure that sites are safe and accessible for members of the public).

Whilst there was recognition that the National Forest for Wales programme has not been designed to provide ongoing revenue funding to woodland sites that have joined the Status Scheme, it was suggested by three stakeholders that sites within the network may require additional funding to enable them and the wider programme to realise its potential.

There was no suggestion during these stakeholder interviews that this funding should necessarily be provided by Welsh Government, but rather that options to support or signpost sites to sources of funding support should be continued as part of the work of the WLO team and through the National Forest for Wales Network. One stakeholder suggested that green finance [footnote 11] models could be explored as a mechanism to secure funding

Footnotes
[10] Number of Status Scheme sites accurate as of 26th November 2025.
[11] Green finance is defined as any financial initiative that funds environmentally friendly projects and services or manages environmental risks.

and investment to support woodland owners in managing their sites and adopt practices that build sustainability, resilience and adaptability.

A further area of consensus, evident from the stakeholder interviews, was strong support for establishing a clear approach to capturing evidence on how the National Forest for Wales sites are contributing to a range of policy areas. This included contributions towards the ambitions set out in the Woodlands for Wales Strategy, flood risk management, the Welsh Government's Net Zero Strategic Plan, priorities for the visitor economy and targets to raise levels of participation in sport, physical activity and active recreation.

Linked to this was a desire for more promotional work to showcase such contributions to educate, inform and influence public opinions on the benefits of woodland and forest sites. Two stakeholders highlighted that efforts to increase the number of visitors and volunteers engaging with National Forest for Wales sites could be aligned with efforts to increase the use of a Citizen Science approach and generate valuable data and understanding of species across woodland and forest sites.

In the view of the evaluation team, expanding the use of a Citizen Science approach across Status Scheme sites that are not already doing it has the potential to contribute evidence and insight to inform future policy development and effective woodland management, both across the National Forest for Wales programmes and forest and woodland sites more generally.

4 Impact evaluation methodologies

As of the end of November 2025, the National Forest for Wales network includes 72 sites. Across the network, sites are delivering a variety of events, activities and community programmes. Examples of these activities and associated benefits are outlined in the previous section of this report. The range of activities are also illustrated within the most recent cohort of ten sites to join the network in June 2025 which include offering community programmes and health initiatives. It is important that the programme as a whole is able to assess the impact these activities are having and where possible collect information across all sites. Therefore, one of the objectives for this evaluation was to recommend a design for assessing social impacts in the future, including what should be built into the programme to support impact measurement.

This section of the report draws on desk-based research and interviews with organisations managing woodland and forest programmes in other areas of the UK. It also draws on an impact measurement workshop with staff involved in National Forest delivery from Welsh Government, representatives from the WLO team and Forest Research which was used to reflect on some of the potential approaches for measuring the impact of the National Forest for Wales programme in the future. This evaluation has focused on options to measure social impact. This is not because economic or environmental impacts are not important to the programme but rather to ensure that this evaluation had a clear scope and focused on providing recommendations in relation to social impact measurement.

Any approach for measuring social impact should seek to align and complement activities and monitoring focusing on measuring environmental impacts across the National Forest for Wales site. This includes, for example, the 30by30 monitoring framework which incorporates a range of potential metrics to measure progress against Welsh Government's commit to 30by30, which is the global target to protect 30% of land, freshwater and seas for people and nature by 2030. The social impact measurement approach adopted by the National Forest for Wales should also align with research undertaken across Status Scheme sites by forestry in Wales stakeholders.

4.1 Impact evaluation approaches used by other forest sites

Previous research has emphasised the 'patchy' nature of the evidence on the impacts and outcomes of community woodlands and forests. Whilst there has been a shift in focus from solely measuring biophysical (e.g. tree planting) impacts to measuring social impacts, the evidence suggests monitoring and evaluation can overly focus on measuring outputs rather than the longer-term impacts for people and communities. For the National Forest for Wales programme, measuring impacts over the longer-term rather than focusing solely on outputs is important and so this report aims to recommend a way to do this.

The evaluation team has reviewed the following woodland and forest programmes to understand and explore their approaches to measuring impact and to identify learning to inform the National Forest for Wales programme:

- The National Forest in England - established in 1991 by the National Forest Company, a charity overseen by a board of trustees, as well as being an Arm's Length Body of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), is responsible for leading the creation of the National Forest in England.

- The Active Forests Programme in England - a long-term partnership between Forestry England and Sport England which aims to create a physical activity habit for life for visitors to the nation's forests in England.

- The Forestry Commission - the government department responsible for protecting, expanding and promoting the sustainable management of woodlands in England.

- Forestry and Land Scotland - the Scottish Government's agency responsible for managing Scotland's national forests and lands.

The review has highlighted a diversity of approaches to measuring social impact as well as valuable learning which is referenced throughout the following sections.

4.1.1   The National Forest in England

The National Forest spans Leicestershire, Derbyshire and Staffordshire and covers around 200 square miles. The initiative was established in 1991 with a focus on transforming a post-industrial landscape by creating a forest across the Midlands, linking the ancient remnant forests of Charnwood and Needwood. The initiative offers funding and advice across a range of themes, from tree planting and woodland management to tourism and arts. This is a separate initiative to the National Forest for Wales programme.

Since its launch, The National Forest has established itself as a living laboratory, collaborating with universities, government bodies and independent organisations to understand, measure, and maximise positive impact on people, nature and sustainability. A wide range of research and impact studies are available from their website. The monitoring systems established by the initiative are focused on assessing the direct impact of the programme as well as its contribution to wider UK policy goals. A range of indicators are collated by the programme team, including:

- Number of trees planted (by species type)

- Forest cover % (6% in 1991 to 25% in 2025)

- % of forest with public access

- New cycle path created (km)

- New forest route created (miles)

- Number of primary and secondary schools engaged

- Number of volunteer groups managing woodlands

- Number of volunteer hours supporting forest activities

- Number of visitors per year

- Number of tourism related jobs

- Contribution to the local economy (£) based on STEAM

- Number of apprenticeships and traineeships

- Total grants to landowners (number and £).

These indicators primarily relate to activities and outputs which may contribute to outcomes and impacts rather than evidencing impacts themselves. For example, capturing information on the number of volunteers managing woodlands is valuable but does not provide any insight on the impact of volunteering on the volunteers themselves or the people engaging with the forest activities they support. This demonstrates the importance of understanding what different metrics are able to show as well as their limitations.

The indicators are collected using a range of approaches, including:

- from applications received to the grants programme administered by The National Forest Company which covers tree planting and support for woodland and habitat management.

- from information held by their Communities and Education team (school engagements and volunteer data).

- from annual data provided by forest agents, contractors and local colleges in relation to apprenticeships and traineeships.

The National Forest in England has also benefited from financial resources to enable them to commission external research capacity to support data collection and impact assessment efforts. This has included commissioning research contractors to understand community perceptions into the creation of the National Forest in England. In 2008, views were gathered from 202 people using a mix of on-street questionnaire surveys and focus group meetings. The results provided insight into perceptions on the safety and accessibility of woodland sites, recreational activities undertaken and views on the impact of the initiative for local communities. The intention was to repeat these surveys every three to five years.

The community perceptions research was updated in 2014 using the same methodology as the 2008 research. The 2014 research achieved 238 responses drawing feedback from questionnaire responses and seven focus group sessions. Core questions in the research included:

- Which parts of the Forest do you visit most?

- What are your reasons for going to these particular places?

- How you would rate these places (for landscape maintenance, paths, car parks, interpretation, safety, and signage)?

- Are there any parts of the Forest where you think there may now be enough trees?

- In what ways has your local community benefitted from the creation of the Forest?

- How would you sum up the impact the Forest's creation has had on you personally?

- What if any concerns do you have about the growth of the Forest in the future?

- How could the National Forest Company make it easier for people to get involved in the future development of the Forest?

They have also commissioned a research contractor to ascertain visitor experience, understand the profile of visitors, visiting patterns, motivations for visiting, modes of transport and levels of satisfaction. This research, undertaken in 2007, was delivered via face-to-face interviews with visitors at five gateway sites and one non-gateway site (the report does not set out the difference between gateway and non-gateway sites). A total of 1,350 interviews were completed. This research was undertaken to allow gateway sites to measure the effectiveness of investments made to facilities and services to grow visitor numbers and to understand how sites could be improved in the future. However, no detail was included in the report on the extent to which the research helped gateway sites in measuring the effectiveness of their investments.

The National Forest Company also provides advice around sustainable tourism, outdoor learning and has also helped to establish a Community Woods Network which provides support for community and voluntary groups that are creating or caring for local woodlands.

Positive wellbeing is one of the three pillars of the work taken forward by The National Forest Company and they provide training and support to landowners who are managing woodlands to capture feedback on the impact of woodland and forest activities. Whilst there are intentions to invest further in their impact measurement approach, specifically to focus on measuring wellbeing, nature connectedness and tourism, there is acknowledgement by representatives interviewed from the National Forest Company of a need to reduce administrative burdens on woodland sites and to avoid taking capacity away from woodland management and delivery. There is also recognition by the National Forest Company of the risk of adopting a silo approach which fails to balance capturing data on environmental impact without capturing data on the views of visitors and communities. The National Forest is due to publish an impact framework in late 2025.[footnote 12]

Whilst the monitoring and measurement approach adopted by The National Forest in England has relevance for the National Forest for Wales, it is not directly transferable. This is partly due to the National Forest for Wales taking a different, national approach to creating a national forest with a number of sites rather than expanding a forest in one area. Whilst the National Forest for Wales programme does distribute grants to woodland and forest site managers, for example TWIG, these grants are not linked to the Status Scheme.

Footnotes

[12] This report was not published at the time of writing.

The approach adopted by The National Forest in England highlights a potential timeframe for data capture of key performance indicators, with survey and data capture work repeated every three to five years to enable sufficient delivery time for changes to be observed and measured. In the view of the evaluation team this is a frequency which is likely to be suitable for the National Forest for Wales programme as it reduces the administrative burden and cost on Status Scheme sites whilst also providing space for delivery progress to be measured.

4.1.2   The Active Forests Programme

The Active Forests Programme is a long-term partnership between Forestry England and Sport England. This programme aims to create a physical activity habit for life for visitors to the nation's forests in England. Forest Research leads on monitoring and evaluation, using a mixed methods approach including the use of participant surveys, qualitative data capture and impact case studies. Active Forests has been running since 2014 and has involved several phases of delivery. The scope, approach and objectives of each phase differ, with later phases building on and going further than preceding phases. A pilot phase (Phase 1) of the project was delivered between 2014 and 2017 involving five forest sites.

Between 2017 and 2022 a broader cohort of 18 forest sites took part in the core delivery programme (Phase 2). A further Transition Phase was delivered in 2022 and 2023 involving four forest sites followed by the current Phase 3 core programme which involves 16 forest sites and is operating between 2023 and 2026.

The programme has also incorporated a social prescribing pilot which was delivered between 2019 and 2023 involving two forest sites and then expanded to the current social prescribing programme which is operating between 2023 and 2026 and involves 4 forest sites.

The programme aims to improve people's health and wellbeing by connecting them with the nation's forests. Delivery of the programme has been supported by Active Forest Coordinators (AFCs), employed at each forest site to support a wide range of organised activities and events. Alongside this, infrastructure at forest sites was developed and improved to support greater accessibility and opportunity for recreational activities. The key performance indicators (KPIs) established for the programme by Sport England and Forestry England are provided below.

4.1.3   Active Forests Programme Key Performance Indicators

Sport England have set up the following KPIs for the programme:
- Increase in the % of the population taking part in sport and physical activity at least once a week.
- Decrease in % of people physically inactive.
- Increase in the % of people utilising outdoor space for exercise / health reasons.

Forestry England have set up the following KPIs for the programme:
- Delivering five million physical activity visits over 20 forest sites.

- Use insights to target the less active to encourage more frequent activity.
- Increase the number and diversity of visitors to the nation's forests.

A mixed methodology has been used to monitor against the above KPIs and evaluate the programme. For Phase 2 of the programme, which completed in 2022, this included:

- Throughput data: breakdowns provided by AFCs on quarterly visits by activity and the number of visits. Details are also provided on the number of volunteers/hours;

- Participant survey data: short survey collected via tablet on site by AFCs/volunteers and online via the Forestry England website. Provides details on activities undertaken, physical activity level and demographics;

- Follow on survey: sent via email 3 months after the participant survey to assess changes in activity levels, along with in-depth details on important benefits, qualities, motivations and barriers to individuals taking part in physical activity at Active Forests sites.

The research process has been supported by the AFCs and volunteers who provided on-site capacity to implement research tools and coordinate data capture. The impact report for Phase 2 provides detail on the areas covered by the research, namely:

- Total number of visits.

- Evidence of behaviour change by participants engaged in organised activities in relation to activity levels and habits using pre and post participant surveys.

- Benefits reported by participants, including mental wellbeing, physical wellbeing, meeting new people.

- Motivations for getting involved reported by participants.

- Feedback on the most important qualities of the forest sites to individuals, for example good choice of paths for physical activity, sufficient car parking, clear signposting and clean toilets.

The research also used survey data to estimate quality adjusted life year (QALY) cost benefits of the main physical activity undertaken by respondents. This has been undertaken by following a methodology used in an earlier 2018 research project focused on developing an indicator for the physical health benefits of recreation in woodlands. Calculations are based on 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity undertaken each week. Cumulative benefits were calculated per person over the time period of activities based on their absence/presence each week/fortnight.

In addition to producing end of phase reports, the programme has also produced a series of impact case studies which are published on its website. The findings of the social prescribing pilot also have potential relevance for the National Forest for Wales programme given the profile of organisations such as Innovate UK that are actively working with a Status Scheme site as outlined in the case studies presented in the 'Benefits delivered in partnership with external organisations' sub-section of this report.

The social prescribing pilot within the Active Forests programme aimed to address barriers to participation in forest-based activities, engage inactive and fairly active people with mild to moderate health conditions and deliver health and wellbeing outcomes.

The evaluation report for the social prescribing pilot, entitled [Feel Good In the Forest](#), focused on the two forest sites involved in the pilot: Chopwell Wood in the North East of England and Thames Chase Community Forest in the Southeast of England. Similar to the Active Forests core programme, AFCs played a central role in supporting the mixed methods approach employed to monitor and evaluate the pilot. Key data capture methods included:

- Individual attendance data at social prescribing activities collected at both forest sites.

- Throughput data provided by AFCs on group visits by activity and number of visits.

- Individual participant survey data: a short survey collected on paper or via tablet by AFCs providing details on activities undertaken, physical activity level and demographics.

- In situ participant observations made when undertaking physical activities with participants to explore interactions, leader input and understand how the activity was delivered.

- Focus groups and interviews held with participants, volunteers, referral agents and activity providers to explore motivations, benefits, and enablers.

The evaluation incorporated two main standardised wellbeing assessment tools, namely the [Office for National Statistics 4 (ONS4) personal wellbeing questions](#) and the [Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale](#) (SWEMWBS) questions. These tools were incorporated into surveys to enable comparison to national samples given that they are widely used in a range of wellbeing interventions. It is important to note that the report does not identify how it attributes changes in wellbeing to the forest activity.

What the Active Forests Programme research and evaluation programme highlights is what is possible, if onsite capacity and resources can be made available, to support data capture and impact measurement work with delivery organisations and providers. It also demonstrates the value of piloting activities to aid learning and the identification of delivery models that may be adopted by other forest sites.

Whilst the extent of active recreation and social prescribing activities delivered across National Forest for Wales sites has not been mapped, evidence from the case study sites suggests that aspects of the monitoring and impact measurement approach used by the Active Forests programme could be suitable for assessing the impact of the programme in the future. For example, the use of pre and post participant surveys to measure impacts relating to physical activity levels or the wellbeing benefits of taking part in activities hosted at Status Scheme sites.

The research report also highlights challenging in using the quantitative SWEMWBS and ONS4 research tools with a drop off in the number of post-event surveys completed. The report authors conclude that the difficulties experienced in using quantitative wellbeing tools emphasised the importance of qualitative approaches as part of a mixed methodology report.

4.1.4   The Forestry Commission

The Forestry Commission in England is the government department responsible for protecting, expanding and promoting the sustainable management of woodlands. They directly manage public woodland in England whilst also regulating the management of woodlands owned by private landowners. Within England the Forestry Commission are supported by two executive agencies, namely Forestry England which acts as the country's largest land manager, and Forest Services which provides expert advice, grants and regulation to private landowners to help them manage their own woods and forests sustainably. The Forestry Commission does not routinely capture key performance indicators in relation to social impact as this has not been requested or required by the UK Government and no funding has been made available to support this.

However, the Forestry Commission does draw on the People and Nature Survey for England (PaNS) and the Public Opinion of Forestry Survey (POFS) to understand trends about people's access, understanding and enjoyment of nature and how it contributes to wellbeing. Like the People and Nature Survey for Wales, PaNS captures data and statistics on how people experience and think about the natural environment and how it contributes to wellbeing. For the Forestry Commission, these national surveys provide a wider source of information on changes in behaviours and attitudes. However, it is not possible to directly attribute or assess the contribution of the work of the Forestry Commission to any change in the metrics included in PaNS or POFS. This is comparable to the National Forest for Wales programme which is not currently able to directly measure its contribution to any changes in the Woodlands for Wales indicators, which draws on the Public Opinion of Forestry Survey Wales data. This is because the role of the National Forest for Wales cannot be isolated from the wider context to enable the measurement of its specific contribution to any observed changes in survey responses.

The Forestry Commission representative interviewed cited the previous efforts to capture data across multiple woodland sites undertaken by the Woodland Trust who created the Woods for People portal to provide a space for woodlands across the UK to collect and store data. The intention was that this data could be used to set targets and measure progress on woodland access. However, the portal is currently dormant due to a lack of funding to coordinate the data capture.

The England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO), which is administered by the Forestry Commission provides funding for capital works to support new woodland creation and installation of infrastructure to support woodland management or provide recreational access. Reporting for this scheme does enable the capture of data on new recreational infrastructure, including accessible footpaths.

Site managers can apply for two types of payments for capital works to help establish and maintain their woodland. This includes support for standard cost items and activities to create new woodland and a payment towards the cost of installing infrastructure to support woodland management or provide recreational access. Site managers can also apply for additional contributions if their woodland's location and design will deliver public benefits based on criteria established by the Forestry Commission.

Whilst this highlights the potential for capturing data from woodland owners or managers in receipt of funding, it is not directly relevant to the National Forest for Wales programme given that it does not provide grant funding for Status Scheme sites.

Whilst the Forestry Commission do not routinely capture social impact metrics, the interviewee from the Forestry Commission suggested that any measurement approach needs to adequately consider the diversity of woodland and forest sites. In practice, this would mean directing different impact measurement tools and approaches to different woodland and forest sites. By way of example, it was highlighted by the interviewee from the Forestry Commission that whilst it would make sense to direct any investment into capturing visitor numbers and experiences towards destination forests (e.g. Sherwood Forest, New Forest or Kielder Forest) it would not be practical or cost effective to apply this to all woodland and forest sites.

They suggested this could be taken forward by creating specific designations or typologies of woodland or forest sites and applying different impact measurement approaches based on the nature of how the site is used by visitors, volunteers and communities. This suggestion has direct relevance for any impact measurement approach implemented by the National Forest for Wales programme.

4.1.5 Forestry and Land Scotland

Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS) is the Scottish Government's agency responsible for managing Scotland's national forests and lands. Their sites cover 9% of Scotland's land area and receive over 10 million visits per year and generate £110 million of tourism spend for the wider Scottish economy. Their website includes details of three hundred woodland and forest destinations, including six forest parks, and five hundred trails. The website also highlights that the forests and land that they manage plays a key part in Scotland's 'natural health service,' providing spaces where people of all ages can spend time enhancing their physical and mental health.

Similar to the Forestry Commission, they aspire to organise their sites on a tiered basis to guide their impact measurement work. The interviewee from FLS suggested that this may include designating national sites, regional sites and local sites. The national sites would be the high profile destinations that are important for Scotland's visitor and tourism economy. Regional sites would be smaller and attract visitors from 1-2 hours away but provide important contributions to local economies. Local sites are key resources for local communities but may not receive many visitors from outside the immediate area.

FLS have established a programme of monitoring to enable measurement of progress against their relevant strategies for Scotland's national forests and land, including their Visitor Strategy and Communities Strategy. The Visitor Strategy sets out how FLS manages services and facilities to welcome everyone to the national forests and land for recreation, health and wellbeing and education. It sits alongside the Communities Strategy which focusses on how communities can get more involved in the decisions, management and use of the national forests and land to help deliver their objectives. Data is captured on visitor numbers, volunteer numbers and tourism spend. The programme of monitoring includes a series of case study sites where more detailed data on visitor behaviours and visitor trends are explored. FLS have established four strategic priorities which are monitored on an annual basis through the range of indicators outlined over page. The evaluation team has not been able to access any technical breakdown of how these indicators are calculated.

4.1.6   Forestry and Land Scotland Strategic Priorities and Indicators

Indicators under the Climate Change priority include:
- Number of destinations with sustainable transport solutions or active travel.
- Area of FLS land within boundary of urban area.
- Percentage of visitor waste recycled – litter and commercial waste
- Number of projects to protect environment or wildlife on visitor sites delivered
- Number of projects to improve resilience of recreation infrastructure to storm damage delivered.

Indicators under the Community priority include:
- Number of Community Engagement Plans on visitor projects/services
- Km of trails managed by communities on FLS land
- Number of Health and Tourism projects FLS is supporting with Communities
- Volunteering days on FLS land.

Indicators under the Rural Economy priority include:
- FLS visitor income
- FLS visitor expenditure
- Value of projects FLS is delivered to support rural tourism
- Estimate of economic impact of projects FLS or partners delivered on Scotland's forests and land
- Number of projects to improve FLS sustainable finance.

Indicators under the Health and Education priority include
- Number of physical barriers to access removed
- Number of new visitors attending events
- Number of health projects
- Number of education projects.

Source Forestry and Land Scotland

Beyond the capture of the key indicators outlined above, FLS have captured visitor experience and perceptions of the benefits from visiting the woodland and forest sites using large scale survey work. The last time FLS captured extensive survey feedback from visitors was in 2013 and to date this has not been updated primarily due to the costs involved which the FLS representative interviewed suggested could potentially take away resources which could otherwise be invested in their woodland and forest sites. Smaller scale data capture has been undertaken on specific topic areas, for example focused research on mountain biking with forest parks.

The representative interviewed from FLS described how they are actively exploring the use of technology solutions to enable them to capture data on visitor numbers in a more cost-effective way, including Strava Metro which is a leading platform for active transportation data including outdoor recreation. They are also exploring the use of Point of Sale (POS) data from retail or catering facilities where present at woodland or forest sites as a proxy measurement to support an assessment of growth in visitor numbers and the contribution of sites to local economies.

The use of innovative approaches to capture activity and visitor profile data was also raised during the impact measurement workshop with representatives from Welsh Government, the WLO team in NRW and Forest Research delivered as part of this evaluation. This included suggestions from workshop participants to pilot the use of locational data systems to draw on mobile phone information to estimate visitor numbers, profile, flow and dwell time. One workshop attendee reported that Strava Metro is currently being piloted by Natural England and the Forestry Commission. A further suggestion from the workshop session was to explore the use of car park data as a proxy measurement approach to measure growth in visitor numbers and insight into visiting habits including time, day and duration of visit. There was interest from workshop participants to learn more about the use of these innovative approaches, in particular to understanding their capabilities, limitations and costs.

The indicators captured by FLS are directly relevant for the National Forest for Wales programme, however the key distinction is that they are capturing these from sites they manage rather than requesting data from other woodland and forest site managers. Whilst these indicators alone cannot demonstrate impact, something which was also highlighted by participants in the impact measurement workshop, in the view of the evaluation team they can be used alongside existing research and evidence to suggest the likely impacts and benefits delivered by visitors and communities.

Further, the point made by FLS on balancing the need to establish impact measurement systems against ensuring that woodland and forest sites have sufficient resources to support their delivery and management is also a relevant consideration for the National Forest for Wales programme. The need to ensure that any impact measurement system was proportionate was also highlighted by those attending the impact measurement workshop. This should be reflected in any impact measurement approach adopted for the National Forest for Wales programme.

4.2 Accreditations, certifications and standards

One option for measuring the impact of the National Forest for Wales programme put forward by two forestry policy in Wales stakeholders during interviews is to draw on the data and assessment work undertaken by woodland and forest sites for recognised accreditations. In the view of the evaluation team, this would be an attractive option for many woodland and forest site managers as it could reduce the need for additional data collection where they already hold certain accreditations.

UKFS is the technical standard for sustainable forest management in the UK. It sets out the approach of the four governments of the UK and defines the requirements and provides guidance for foresters on how to practise sustainable forest management in the UK. It provides a basis for operating grant schemes and official controls and support for regulatory processes in the UK.

As outlined in the guidance, the UKFS provides the foundation for several voluntary certification and quality assurance schemes used in the UK. The standard includes details on a range of requirements and guidelines across areas such as biodiversity, climate change and, of relevance for social impact measurement, people. The standard outlines an expectation that woodland and forest management plans would incorporate indicators to enable progress against the UKFS requirements to be measured at regular intervals. However, the standard does not incorporate any specific guidance on processes for measuring outcomes and impacts. For woodlands that use the UKFS standard to guide their woodland management plans, there is no formal check on compliance with the standard.

A separate standard is provided by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) Certification which aims to ensure that products come from responsibly managed forests that provide environmental, social and economic benefits. [FSC have developed a set of 10 principles and 57 criteria](#) that sites must achieve to become an FSC certified forests. Principle 7 requires sites to have a management plan, which is already covered as a mandatory requirement by the National Forest Status Scheme. Principle 8 requires that sites commit to conducting monitoring, appropriate to the scale and intensity of forest management, to assess the condition of the forest, yields of forest products, chain of custody, management activities and their social and environmental impacts.

How this monitoring is undertaken is for sites to determine. The guidance does state that monitoring and evaluation activities are undertaken proportionate to the scale, intensity and risk of management activities. FSC certified sites are required to make publicly available a summary of the results of their monitoring activity. There is a cost associated with the FSC scheme. Llais y Goedwig are currently exploring how community woodlands could group together to gain accreditation to limit the costs for individual community woodland sites.

Finally, the UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS) is an independent certification standard for verifying sustainable woodland management in the UK. Woodland owners/managers need to appoint an accredited certification body to carry out audits against the UKWAS standard. There is also a cost associated with UKWAS.

UKWAS is recognised by both the FSC and the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) schemes, which means that sites do not have to apply separately to each scheme.

The relevance for the National Forest for Wales programme is that Status Scheme sites that have secured recognised accreditations, certifications and standards may already be capturing monitoring and impact data which could potentially support social impact measurement. It is not a requirement for National Forest for Wales sites to hold a recognised accreditation, certification or standard. Managing plans submitted by sites applying to join the National Forest Status Scheme are assessed in line with the UKFS. However, undertaking a mapping exercise of existing Status Scheme sites would help to understand which hold a recognised accreditation, certification and standard. This could be added as an additional question to the Status Scheme Application Form.

Further work could be undertaken to understand the extent to which sites hold relevant accreditations, certifications and standards and to then determine what is collected via these schemes and the extent to which these may provide data and evidence to support an assessment of impact of the National Forest for Wales programme. This would help to avoid any duplication of data collection and reduce administrative burden for woodland and forest site managers within the Status Scheme.

4.3 Valuation tools and frameworks

As the focus of this evaluation is to recommend a design for assessing social impacts in the future, there is merit in looking at the use of valuation tools and social impact frameworks. There is useful learning from previous research on valuation methods commissioned by the Welsh Government. For example, in 2023 the Welsh Government commissioned a research project to understand the range of benefits, costs and risks of transferring woodland assets to third parties. The research aimed to inform the development of a signposting guide for NRW to support future appraisal of projects, including their social value, in relation to community or third sector access to woodland and/or timber on the WGWE. The research review concluded that there is a consistent lack of robust empirical evidence in relation to the realised impact of asset transfer on communities and wider society, and particularly in relation to biophysical, and economic and financial impacts. The research reported that the evidence is strongest for wellbeing impacts related to improved woodland access/ exposure and participation in volunteering. The research team also explored a range of valuation sources and appraisal frameworks which may provide options to assess social impacts in the future – this may be of relevance for the National Forest for Wales programme. Tools included HM Treasury's Wellbeing Guidance for Appraisal, which enables a measurement of subjective wellbeing and the Outdoor Recreation Valuation Tool (ORVal) which predicts the number of visits to existing and new greenspaces in England and Wales and estimates the welfare value of those visits in monetary terms.

Additional research on social valuation methods for community-managed forestry piloted two evaluation tools to investigate these approaches.[footnote13]

The project chosen for piloting the tools was a prospective plan for the community in Treherbert to take over stewardship of the forest within the Cwm Saerbren basin.

The project piloted the use of the Welsh National TOMS framework, which is a measurement system developed for public and private sector organisations to assess and maximise the social value they create through procurement. It is aligned with Wales' Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015, using seven themes, 35 outcomes, and 93 measures to track contributions to social, economic, and environmental well-being in a consistent, standardised way across public bodies. It also piloted the use of Social Value Engine, which has been developed to support the social, environmental, and economic impact assessment needs of the public and third sectors.

The pilot project concluded that the Social Value Engine was the most practical and accessible tool but that prospective users would require initial training support to enable them to administer it for their own woodland or forest site. The report does not set out the reasons for reaching this conclusion but this would be valuable learning for the National Forest for Wales programme.

It is unclear to what extent forest and woodland owners within the Status Scheme are using comparable valuation and appraisal tools. Capturing this data either as part of the Status Scheme application form or through a brief survey of Status Scheme sites would help to inform options on future impact measurement for the National Forest for Wales programme.

Findings from the pilot project referenced above suggests there is merit in incorporating the Social Value Engine as a measurement tool within any impact measurement approach adopted by the National Forest for Wales programme. Any use of this tool would need to determine whether it is focused specifically on community managed woodlands within the Status Scheme or is more generally applicable for all sites. Similar work to test the use of the tool with community managed sites may need to be undertaken with Status Scheme sites to understand from site managers whether the Social Value Engine would be a tool applicable for the work they are doing in their woodland.

4.4 Options for National Forest for Wales

The evidence highlighted through engagement with other woodland and forestry programmes and those involved closely in the delivery of the National Forest for Wales programmes suggests that there should be no single approach for measuring social impact. Given the diversity of sites included within the Status Scheme network, the approach to social impact measurement needs to be proportionate to sites in terms of their size, ownership, management structure and capacity and the nature of activities delivered.

Footnotes
[13] Chris Blake, Matt Reardon, Ian Thomas, Chloe-Jayne Shellard, Maria Wilding, Kate Denner, and Madeleine Palmer. Evaluating Social Value for Community Managed Forestry. Unpublished report, July 2025.

This part of the report provides a range of options that could form the basis of the impact measurement approach for the programme. The options below highlight some of the key considerations such as the resources required and the benefits and limitations of different impact measurement approaches which the Welsh Government can use to inform their decisions of which to adopt for the National Forest for Wales programme. Further engagement with Status Scheme sites will be necessary to explore and understand their perspectives on the practicality and feasibility of taking forward different impact measurement approaches in the future.

The main learning points from the other woodland and forest programmes and from the impact measurement workshop which should guide these options can be summarised as follows:

- Feedback from interviews with forestry policy stakeholders in Wales, suggestions from interviewees from the woodland and forest programmes and attendees of the impact measurement workshop suggest the importance of ensuring that any impact measurement approach is proportionate and suitably flexible to recognise the diversity of forest and woodland sites.

- The indicators and outputs used by the woodland and forest programmes in other areas of the UK described above largely focus on capturing data related to activities and outputs. In the absence of indicators for the National Forest for Wales programme, any impact measurement approach should look to introduce these first to capture some consistent measures of activity and then expand the approach to support the measurement of outcomes and impacts.

- There is merit in capturing information from all 72 Status Scheme sites on the number of volunteers they support and the number of volunteering hours donated. Further work could be undertaken to administer a standardised volunteer survey across the sites to explore the positive social impact delivered for volunteers through their work within the National Forest for Wales programme.

- Based on feedback from interviews with forestry policy in Wales stakeholders and suggestions from interviewees from the woodland and forest programmes in other areas of the UK, the parameters of the impact measurement approach should be guided by any policy areas or evidence requirements from government departments.

- Consider a 3-5 year timeframe for undertaking more in-depth impact assessment work across the programme to enable sufficient time for progress to be measured. Other programmes such as National Forest England implement similar timelines, and in the view of the evaluation team, this frequency is likely to reduce the administrative burden and cost for Status Scheme sites.

- The Active Forests programme has been supported by dedicated resources to support data capture as part of a longitudinal monitoring and evaluation programme. This suggests that determining available resources that can support data capture for the National Forest for Wales programme will be important to inform the impact

measurement approach adopted. The Active Forests programme has worked directly with participants engaging in programmed activities at woodland and forest sites. This approach differs from undertaking impact measurement with general visitors to woodland and forest sites. The use of a similar approach within the National Forest for Wales programme would only be relevant to sites that have a comparable programme of activities and where participants are more likely to engage with data collection and impact measurement approaches such as the use of surveys, assessment tools and qualitative interviews. The learning from the social prescribing pilot with the Active Forests programme also highlights the difficulties of using quantitative wellbeing tools such as SWEMWBS or ONS4 and thus the importance of qualitative methods as part of a mixed-methods approach. This suggests that any comparable approach would be best used within a small number of demonstrator sites subject to sufficient resources being available for the research.

- Based on evidence from The National Forest in England and the Active Forests programme, there is merit in establishing a research budget to provide capacity and expertise to capture social impacts working in collaboration with sites. Consideration should be given to the timeframes over which research funding is allocated to avoid producing a baseline position without the necessary funding to update this research in the future.

- Interviews with other woodland and forestry programmes across the UK highlighted how these programmes selected impact measurement tools specific to the areas their programmes are aiming to make an impact (e.g. wellbeing, learning, social connectedness, physical activity). This will be an important consideration for the National Forest for Wales when selecting which tools and approaches would be most appropriate and for which sites. These tools and approaches would also need to reflect the overall programme priorities.

- Based on suggestions provided by the Forestry Commission and FLS, the National Forest for Wales programme could consider establishing a typology of woodland and forest sites and using this to select a sample of sites for more in-depth impact measurement. For example, national sites, regional sites and local sites.

- The woodland and forest programmes in other areas of the UK are either piloting or exploring options to pilot the use of innovative technologies to support sites in capturing activity, output and impact data. The impact measurement approach adopted for the National Forest for Wales programme should seek to accommodate the piloting of appropriate technologies to generate learning and insight. The pilot process should also explore which groups of people may be excluded from the data captured using these technologies (e.g. those without a smartphone) and how this is accounted for in any data analysis.

- The National Forest for Wales should map the prevalence of woodland and forest accreditations, certifications and standards within sites and determine the extent to which these may provide data and evidence to support an assessment of impact of the programme.

- Training, guidance and resources should be provided to sites to encourage and enable them to use recognised impact measurement tools. For example, the use of Social Value Engine if this is considered appropriate for woodland sites.

- The aspirations and capacity of sites should be considered within expectations for how sites should measure their social impact. Based on the experiences of interviewees from the other woodland and forest programmes across the UK, participation should be voluntary, not mandatory and should not detract from their work in managing their woodland or forest site.

The experiences from the other woodland and forest programmes and from the impact measurement workshop highlighted the importance of working with sites and building on existing monitoring and impact measurement activity to ensure that existing efforts are recognised and not duplicated.

This may require a brief consultation exercise to benchmark what impact measurement approaches and activities are already in use across the network of 72 Status Scheme sites, what tools are being used and areas of interest in relation to measuring social impacts. For sites owned by the National Trust or the National Park Authority, there may be options to draw on existing visitor insight data or include questions about the National Forest for Wales within future membership or visitor surveys. For sites that have secured a TWIG grant, this could include undertaking thematic analysis of their end of grant evaluation report submitted to the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

The Status Scheme Guidance outlines that sites agreeing to become part of the National Forest for Wales network may be asked for information on how their woodlands contribute to the Woodlands for Wales indicators. [footnote 14] In the context of measuring impact, and based on the experience of the evaluation team, it is important to clarify the terminology used when discussing monitoring and measurement prior to the commencement of any data capture from Status Scheme sites. For example, the distinction between activities, outputs, outcome and impacts.

Whilst changes in public perceptions, behaviours and experiences around woodland and forest sites can be drawn from the Public Opinion of Forestry Survey for Wales, the National Survey for Wales and the People and Nature Survey Wales, it is not currently possible to attribute any changes identified within these surveys to the National Forest for Wales programme due to the survey methodology and sample sizes used. This challenge is not unique to Wales.

Footnotes

[14] The Woodlands for Wales Indicators measure progress towards the high level outcomes described in Woodlands for Wales, the 50 year strategy for woodlands and trees in Wales.

Options to boost the survey sample sizes to assess any differences in communities around Status Scheme sites could be explored as part of a future impact measurement approach to determine if this would enable any statistically robust assessment of the impact of the National Forest for Wales programme.

4.4.1 Drawing on the existing evidence base

As evident in the monitoring approaches of The National Forest in England and FLS, many of their key performance indicators relate to activities and outputs rather than outcomes and impacts. Where it is not possible to resource extensive social impact measurement, the approach adopted by the National Forest for Wales programme should adopt a theory-based approach to help address questions about whether or how activities delivered across Status Scheme sites are creating social impacts, how and why this occurred, and how context may have influenced this to help understand to what extent results can be generalised at a programme-level.

Theory-based methods can be used to investigate and explore the causal chains thought to bring about change as well as understand how the change occurred. In the structure of a Theory of Change model, this would include creating an understanding of how activities delivered at National Forest for Wales sites and the outputs from these activities create observable and measurable outcomes and impacts.

Whilst a Theory of Change model was created through the evaluation of the National Forest Demonstrators, there is currently no programme-level model for the National Forest for Wales. This would be a useful starting point to provide the architecture for evaluating the impact of the programme. By way of example, the use of the Social Value Engine requires the creation of a Theory of Change model.

It is possible within this approach to draw on the existing evidence base on what is likely to be created through comparable activities and outputs. Using a theory-based approach this can help to test the assumptions around how activities are expected to deliver the social impacts Welsh Government would expect to see based on comparable interventions or activities. For example, where sites are capturing data to evidence growth in the number of visitors, the existing evidence base can be used to evidence the likely contribution this will make to areas such as nature connectedness and physical and wellbeing benefits based on previous research.

There is a growing body of evidence on the benefits (and disbenefits) of woodland creation, woodland expansion and the management of undermanaged woodland. The National Forest Evidence Review commissioned by Welsh Government draws much of this together and represents a valuable resource that can aid efforts to establish the causal links between the sites that have joined the network and stated outcomes and impacts. More broadly there are a range of evidence sources which articulate the outcomes and impacts of people having a connection with nature or from increasing physical activity and active recreation.

There is also a strong evidence base on the wellbeing benefits of volunteering and the positive impacts on Forest Schools on young children. Capturing basic information from Status Scheme sites on the number of volunteers and volunteer hours or the number of children and young people participating in forest school activities can be used to demonstrate their contribution to a range of positive social impacts outlined in the existing evidence base. This emphasises how activity and output data collection for the National Forest for Wales programme could be used to start to measure contributions of Status Scheme sites to defined social outcomes and impacts. However, the evaluation team acknowledges that the loss of the education department within NRW may lead to difficulties in supporting sites to develop forest school activities.

The Bio-Well research project funded by the Woodland Trust highlights the positive impacts of woodland biodiversity. This project has established a biodiversity and human wellbeing scale, which is a set of 17 questions which enables an assessment of the effect that biodiversity has on people's wellbeing. The questions ask individuals to consider their wellbeing in relation to specific metrics and attributes of biodiversity, including the variety of species, behaviours, colours, shapes, textures, sounds and smells. The responses they provide relate to physical, emotional, cognitive, social and spiritual wellbeing. Responses are given a score out of 100 based on how strongly their wellbeing responds to biodiversity.

The findings of the Bio-Well research project can provide a source of evidence on the contribution of woodland and forest sites to improving people's wellbeing. The biodiversity and human wellbeing scale could also be explored as a potential tool within the impact measurement approach adopted for the National Forest for Wales programme.

The evidence from the case study sites reported in the previous section of this report points to the programme providing a range of benefits for individuals and communities. This is delivered through activities led by volunteers, provision of learning opportunities and by encouraging people to take part in active recreation within forest and woodland sites. In the view of the evaluation team, this illustrates the positive contribution that the programme is making to a range of Wellbeing of Future Generations Act milestones. Examples of which milestones the case study sites appear to be contributing toward includes:

- To increase the percentage of adults with two or more healthy lifestyle behaviours to more than 97% by 2050.

- To increase the percentage of children with two or more healthy behaviours to 94% by 2035 and more than 99% by 2050.

- At least 90% of 16–24-year-olds will be in education, employment, or training by 2050.

- Increase the percentage of people who volunteer by 10% by 2050, demonstrating Wales's status as a volunteering nation.

- To reverse the decline in biodiversity with an improvement in the status of species and ecosystems by 2030 and their clear recovery by 2050.

There was consensus amongst the forestry policy in Wales stakeholders interviewed from Llais y Goedwig, Forest Research, National Trust and three local authority representatives that it would be helpful for any monitoring or measurement approach to build an evidence base on the programme's contribution to these milestones and other relevant policy objectives and communicate this to a public audience.

4.4.2   Agreeing what standard of evidence is required

When considering options for measuring impacts it is helpful to determine what standard of evidence the programme wishes to reach. There is a hierarchy of evidence ranging from expert opinion and case study evidence to systematic reviews and randomised controlled trials (see Figure 4.1 below). The evidence hierarchy suggests that not all evidence is the same and that certain research is viewed as stronger, by design, than others. The higher a research design ranks on the pyramid, the more likely the evidence can be reported with confidence.

Figure 4.1 Hierarchy of evidence
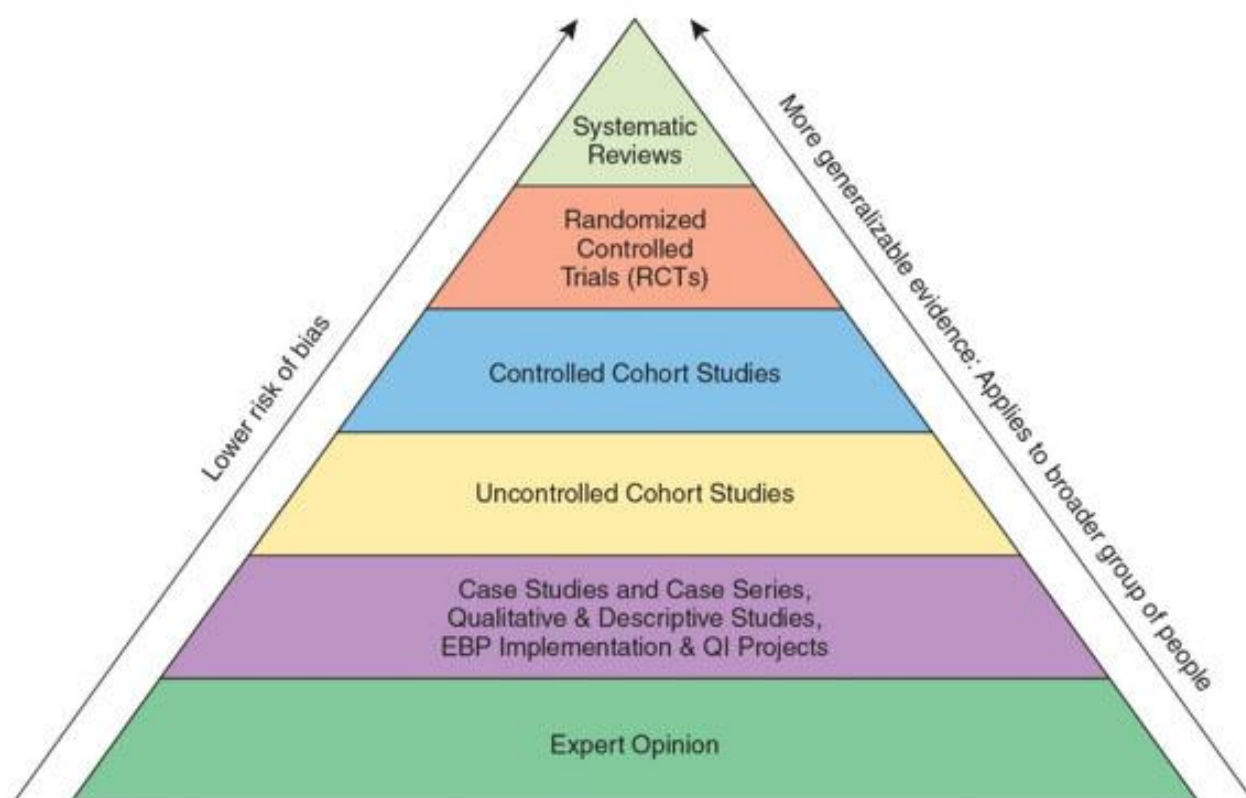
Source: Reproduced from the University of Maryland School of Nursing.

For a programme of the scale and diversity of National Forest for Wales, there may be scope to undertake research and evidence gathering at different levels within this evidence pyramid. For example, a few sites could be designated as research sites where resources could be allocated to enable the use of controlled cohort studies or uncontrolled cohort studies. A controlled cohort study is an observational study that follows a group of people (a cohort) over time to compare the development of an outcome or outcomes (e.g. physical activity) between a group exposed to a factor (for example participation in an activity programme) and a control group that was not exposed. An uncontrolled cohort study is an observational study that follows a single group of people (cohort) over time without a control group to track outcomes.

The Active Forests programme has been able to achieve a level of evidence equivalent to an uncontrolled cohort study on the hierarchy of evidence due to the resources made available. However, the Active Forests programme has highlighted challenges in using standardised quantitative assessment tools to measure impact on wellbeing as well as difficulties associated with low sample sizes. This emphasises the importance of adopting a proportionate, mixed methods approach which draws on qualitative methods to measure and understand impact at an individual level (e.g. for participants and visitors). Broadly, this would be consistent with the case studies and qualitative and descriptive studies level in the hierarchy of evidence.

4.4.3   Defining the impacts to be measured

The National Forest for Wales outcomes cover a range of envisaged changes for both people and nature. These contribute to the range of areas incorporated into the Woodlands for Wales indicators, including measures associated with tree health, carbon balance, community involvement and recreation. Though their application for joining the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme sites have been assessed, against the six high level outcomes for the programme, which 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.

It is important that any impact measurement approach adopted by the National Forest for Wales programme clarifies the breadth and range of impact areas to be captured. What is evident from comparable forest programmes in the UK (see section 4.1) is that there are benefits in capturing outcomes and impact for both nature and people to enable a more holistic assessment of the contribution that woodland and forest sites provide across a range of policy areas. However, the tools and approaches used to measure nature and environment-based changes may differ from those seeking to measure social value and impacts for people and communities. For measuring the social impact of the National Forest for Wales programme, the four key outcomes for people articulated in the Woodlands for Wales strategy may provide an initial focus.

Providing clarity on the timeframes over which impacts are to be measured is also important. As outlined in the National Forest in Wales evidence review: Benefits to Society report commissioned by Welsh Government, in many cases longitudinal studies are needed to demonstrate whether programmes such as the National Forest for Wales are changing attitudes and behaviours. One example of a longitudinal survey is the Renewing Biodiversity Longitudinal Survey (ReBLS) in England which presents an example of a study which is exploring how individual attitudes to nature change over time. As the National Forest for Wales programme is designed to create a long-lasting legacy for future generations, it may be necessary to consider incorporating longitudinal data capture approaches within any impact measurement framework to measure changes and evidence social impacts.

One of the areas raised by attendees in the impact measurement workshop was the value and importance of measuring feedback and views from Status Scheme sites on the support they have received from the WLO team, the impact of being part of the network on their woodland management and the extent to which being part of the programme had enabled them to access revenue or grant funding to support the delivery of their management plan objectives.

This suggests that any future impact measurement approach should seek to evidence this. In the view of the evaluation team this could be done through a survey of sites and should be conducted every 3-5 years but with more regular feedback explored as part of network meetings.

4.4.4   Providing a flexible framework for impact measurement

To reflect the breadth and diversity of sites in terms of their capacity, visitor/user volumes and levels of volunteering supported, a tiered approach is likely to be suitable as a framework to structure the social impact measurement approach. Importantly this approach would be informed by a consultation exercise with Status Scheme sites to ascertain their views on the three levels and measurement approaches suggested. Sites that are focused on delivering environmental and biodiversity benefits only rather than social impacts or sites who do not wish to actively attract visitors, may be excluded for any requirement to engagement with the social impact measurement approach.

Sites should be encouraged to capture basic monitoring and activity data (Level 1) to enable the programme to capture details on the prevalence and distribution of activities and volunteer contributions across the 72 Status Scheme sites (excluding any sites looking to deliver environmental and biodiversity benefits only).

A smaller number of sites may wish to adopt a measurement approach that helps to expand the evidence base (Level 2). These sites could develop a theory of change to articulate how they expect the activities delivered at their woodland site would generate measurable outputs and create observable and measurable outcomes and impacts. Level 2 sites could use impact case studies and qualitative and descriptive studies, guided by the outcome and impact areas included in their theory of change. This would build on the monitoring and output data captured in Level 1 to also focus on using mixed methods approach to capture data on the experiences of visitors, volunteers and participants and the social impacts arising from their engagement with the forest and woodland site.

Subject to the availability of resources, a handful of sites could be assigned as demonstrator sites (Level 3). These sites would go beyond applying a theory-based approach specific to their site (Level 2) by adopting an impact measurement approach to produce more generalisable evidence. This would aid the National Forest for Wales programme by using these demonstrator sites to illustrate what the likely social impacts are across sites with comparable activities. These sites could adopt a measurement approach based on the use of controlled or uncontrolled cohort studies. Based on the experience of the Active Forests programme, this would be most relevant for sites delivering programmes of activity that work with participants over a sustained period rather than attempting to capture data from general visitors.

This measurement approach would be suited to the use of longitudinal studies and the capture of empirical data which is able to generate measurable evidence on defined social impacts. These demonstrator sites would require a commitment to measure impacts over time (i.e. 3-5 years).

An example high-level structure is provided over the page.

4.4.5   Options for a Tiered Approach to Impact Measurement

Level 1: Building the Foundation. The following measurement approach is suggested:
- A monitoring template is produced for sites which focuses on recreational and educational activities and outputs and volunteer numbers/hours.
- As outlined in the previous section of this report, the case study site visits include examples of positive work with external organisations. Collating information on the number of external organisations and partners working/delivering activities on Status Scheme sites can provide a map of the nature and extent of activities which are focused on supporting a range of social impacts for different groups of participants or visitors.
- The monitoring template could be incorporated into the application process for future sites applying to join the Status Scheme. For the existing 72 sites, an agreed monitoring template could be distributed to capture this data. This data collection

exercise should be completed as a minimum every 3 years. This would provide data on activities and outputs across Status Scheme sites to contribute to a programme level theory of change for the National Forest for Wales. It would also provide the foundation for more in-depth social impact measurement as outlined in Levels 2 and 3 below.

Suitable for:
- All sites, including those with limited resources or capacity for data capture, could collect this information.

Level 2: Expanding the evidence base. The following measurement approach is suggested:
- Sites could be supported to produce a Theory of Change to help them articulate the social impacts they are hoping to achieve and how their activities and work contribute to these. The Theory of Change would assist with the design of bespoke and site specific research tools – discussed in the bullet points below - and measurement approaches.
- Visitor surveys could be used to establish the profile of visitors and capture feedback on their visit experience. The Community Survey used as part of this evaluation provides an example of such an approach.
- Guided by a site specific Theory of Change, thematic case studies focusing on specific areas of social impact such as wellbeing or nature connectedness could be developed using standardised or bespoke tools to establish the outcomes and impacts delivered for those participating in education, learning and recreational activities (e.g. Social Value Engine, Bio-Well wellbeing scale, community survey tool). This may benefit from the creation of a standardised case study template for the programme and guidance for sites in how to produce their case study.
- Training could be provided for staff and volunteering in undertaking research and collecting data.
- Based on the example of Buglife and their work at Sirhowy Hill Woodlands, mapping and expanding the use of Citizen science projects can help to both demonstrate community engagement with woodland management and habitat restoration as well as capturing valuable data on habitats across Status Scheme sites.

Suitable for:
- Sites with staff and/or volunteer resource and capacity to undertake research activities.
- Distribution of impact measurement guided by the type of site to differentiate between national sites that are high profile and important for Wales's visitor economy and local sites which are important for their respective communities. Level 2 data capture should seek to include a mix of these sites to maximise learning.

Level 3: Deepening the evidence base. The following measurement approach is suggested:

- Resources could be provided to externally commission research and evaluation work directed towards exploring the contribution of sites to agreed Wellbeing of Future Generations Act milestones and the Woodlands for Wales outcomes for people.
- A boosted sample of the Public Opinion of Forestry survey could be used to ascertain any changes for communities located near to Status Scheme sites. Sufficient resources would be required to capture feedback from existing or prospective visitors using an agreed sampling approach. Based on the feedback from other woodland and forestry programmes in the UK, this will require resources to not only produce an initial survey (baseline) but also to update the survey at an agreed frequency.
- Given other woodland and forest programmes from across the UK are piloting the use of locational data systems and technologies to assess visitor numbers, profile and dwell time, there is merit in these approaches being piloted across the National Forest for Wales network.

Suitable for:

- Demonstrator sites which can provide insights into how woodlands and forests contribute to Welsh Government policy objectives.
- Sites that can commit to measuring impacts over a longer timeframe time (i.e. 3-5 years).

The success of the National Forest for Wales programme in growing the number of woodland sites within the Status Scheme presents both opportunities and challenges. For opportunities, the breadth and diversity of sites can open possibilities to generate valuable learning on the outcomes delivered for nature, people and communities. Consultation with Status Scheme sites can determine areas of interest and aspirations in relation to measuring social impact, which may inform which sites move to Levels 2 and 3 of the proposed impact measurement approach.

There are also opportunities to realise and activate a substantial volunteer base and network of professionals to capture data and evidence on benefits and outcomes for people, participants and communities, as well as habitat change and wildlife benefits resulting from improved woodland management.

Initial challenges for building the foundation of an impact measurement approach at Level 1 are likely to include securing buy-in from the sites and capturing indicators in a consistent way which enables aggregation at a programme level. Expanding the evidence base and deepening the evidence base will require the provision of training and guidance for sites in the use of impact measurement tools and potentially resources to commission external research capacity to work with a sample of sites over a sustained period of time.

At a programme management level, a range of systems and processes will need to be constructed to enable secure data sharing and the systematic aggregation of activity, output, outcome and impact evidence. This will require sufficient resource and capacity to maximise the use of this data to generate programme level evidence on the social impacts delivered by the National Forest for Wales programme.

A Research Forest for Wales has been established within the National Forest for Wales Network to maximise opportunities for tree-based research in Wales. Led by Forest Research, activities within the Research Forest for Wales aim to contribute directly to the National Forest for Wales outcomes. The Research Forest intends to facilitate the establishment of experiments and demonstration areas across Wales which will increase options for knowledge exchange, opportunities for educational activities, and the sharing of experience gained.

This has the potential to facilitate data capture relating to social impact measurement, for example the use of Citizen Science which would evidence the involvement of communities with their local forest and woodland sites. In addition, building the profile of the National Forest for Wales programme as a network open to research collaborations may help to attract external funding to support social impact measurement at Levels 2 and 3 of the proposed approach. This could include research funding accessed via the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), Health and Care Research Wales, the National Lottery Community Fund, Community Foundation Wales or the Wales School for Social Prescribing Research.

4.4.6 What needs to be built into the programme to enable impact measurement

In the view of the evaluation team the main things that need to be built into the programme to enable the impact assessment approaches suggested is:

- guidance for sites on how to capture the necessary data to provide the foundation for impact assessment;
- reassurance that engagement in efforts to expand or deepen the evidence base is not a mandatory requirement for being part of the Status Scheme; and
- encouragement to commence or continue their own impact measurement journey.

Guidance, including tools and resources could be produced and disseminated to Status Scheme sites via the Woodland Liaison Team, to support sites in capturing data and evidencing their contribution to social impacts. Where tools and resources are provided, sites should be required to share their data with the National Forest for Wales programme team to enable programme level analysis. Sufficient resource and experience would need to be available within the programme team to support collation and analysis of this data.

The community survey tool used by this evaluation provides one example of a basic data capture tool that could be provided to all sites to support them in capturing feedback from visitors/users. Aggregated at a programme level, this has the potential to generate valuable insight and learning from the programme. Privacy notices and survey tools could be updated to capture informed agreement from respondents for their anonymous responses to be shared with sites specifically to support their own monitoring activities. For site managers that have their own processes for capturing feedback from visitors or members, there may be potential to discuss options for including questions specific to the National Forest for Wales programme.

The Status Scheme guidance indicates that sites may be requested to provide information on how their woodlands contribute to a set of indicators produced by Welsh Government to measure how the National Forest for Wales is developing and whether it is meeting its objectives. Providing a template to request a small set of standardised data measures from sites would be advantageous in assessing the collective contribution of the programme to a range of policy areas. This would support Level 1 Building the Foundation of the impact measurement approach.

The exact composition of this data set at Level 1 will be governed by the requirements set out by Welsh Government and in the theory of change model development for the National Forest for Wales programme. However, it may cover areas such as volunteer numbers, educational activities offered, recreational activities at the site or the number of trees planted. Baseline data could be captured within the Status Scheme application form with subsequent updates provided through a short survey of sites, the frequency of which could be every 3 years which aligns with the timeframes reported by other woodland and forest programmes. At Level 2, additional metrics could be collected to enable sites to measure against their Theory of Change. These additional metrics could be shared with the National Forest for Wales programme team but this would not be mandatory.

In terms of reassurance, one of the themes raised during interviews with other woodland and forest programmes was to ensure that any requirements for measuring impact do not discourage new sites from joining the Status Scheme or result in existing sites deciding to withdraw from the scheme. This would be counterproductive to the objectives of the programme. Sites should be reassured that any requests for data captured will be light-touch and that guidance and support provided to ensure that they are clear on what is expected and how the data will be used. Central support from the National Forest for Wales programme team will need to accommodate the likely variation on capacity and experience across sites in capturing the monitoring and activity data suggested for Level 1. Guidance and support should be made available for sites that wish to undertake more in-depth impact measurement activity.

Sites should be encouraged to expand the level of data and evidence they capture on the impact of their woodland or forest site. This has the potential to support efforts to secure funding and investment but also to raise awareness of the benefits of engagement with woodland sites within their respective communities. This may include sites progressing to Level 3 of the impact measurement framework should resources permit.

For this cohort of sites, consideration should be given to creating a grant funding programme to enable sites to access funds to support their impact measurement activity. This could include, for example, purchasing of visitor counting systems or locational data systems. The evaluation team envisage that only a small number of sites would reach Level 3 of the impact measurement framework. These would be demonstrator sites where additional resources could be made available to support more rigorous and longitudinal impact measurement.

This may include collaborations with academic departments and access to research grants to help to address some of the gaps in evidence outlined in the National Forest in Wales evidence review: Benefits to Society report, namely that much of the evidence is from outside of Wales and that there is only limited evidence of changes being sustained over the long-term. The Active Forests Programme provides an example of what level of impact evidence can be captured where sufficient resources are provided over a sustained period.

In the view of the evaluation team, sites should also be encouraged to actively participate in the National Forest for Wales Network to share learning and practice both on woodland management and their impact measurement activities. Consideration could be given to hosting an Annual National Forest for Wales Symposium to both facilitate knowledge exchange but also to recognise the celebrate the work of the Status Scheme sites and their contribution to a range of policy areas. This should incorporate any research undertaken under the banner of the Research Forest for Wales initiative. An annual symposium could also provide an opportunity to further promote the programme. A similar approach has been adopted by the Country Land and Business Association (CLA) to provide opportunities to network, share practice and facilitate learning.

Finally, a key area that needs to be addressed within the programme in relation to impact measurement is central capacity to implement the approach and provide guidance, reassurance and encouragement to sites and coordinate the central collation, processing and analysis of data and evidence submitted. Given there are 72 sites that have joined the Status Scheme the potential volume of data and evidence generated should not be underestimated. This includes not only the data gathered across the three impact measurement levels, but also potential evidence from the site's respective woodland management plans and submissions to their woodland and forest accreditation bodies.

Drawing on this rich source of programme level data to generate insight, learning and evidence will require sufficient capacity and skills within the programme team. How this function is structured and what resources are provided will need to be agreed by NRW and the Welsh Government. Sufficient resource will also be necessary to convene and facilitate the network meetings, which could include sub-groups or communities of practice created to bring together Status Scheme sites exploring specific impact areas. [footnote 15] Should the option to host an annual symposium be taken up this will also need to be factored into the programme's capacity.

5   Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

This independent evaluation of the National Forest for Wales programme covers the period of delivery from September 2022 to late October 2025. This Phase 2 report builds on the work undertaken in Phase 1 of the evaluation which focused on the delivery of the National Forest programme from 2022 onwards, including exploring the effectiveness of the delivery mechanisms introduced, staff roles, funding and the National Forest Status scheme.

This report has focused on understanding the views of communities and organisations regarding the National Forest, both as a concept for increasing woodland cover in Wales and through their experiences of National Forest sites to date, including any perceived benefits. It has also explored which social impact evaluation methodologies would be most suitable for evaluating the National Forest in the future, and what elements need to be built into the programme to enable this.

5.2 The National Forest as a concept for increasing woodland cover in Wales

The most recent POFS survey findings provide useful context for changing attitudes to a range of areas including the benefits and disadvantages of woodlands, woodland recreation and community engagement. The 2025 POFS findings suggest that continued efforts are required to promote the benefits of woodlands for people, wildlife and the environment. In the view of the evaluation team, this emphasises the positive contribution that the National Forest for Wales programme can provide to promote the benefits of forest and woodland sites and encourage more people to visit them.

Evidence from the case study site visits suggests that levels of awareness of the National Forest for Wales programme amongst visitors was low. Where volunteers across case study sites indicated that they had heard about the programme, their knowledge of what it entailed was often limited.

Respondents to the community survey, which may have included responses from both visitors and volunteers, reported much higher levels of awareness. Whilst the views of visitors and volunteers either engaged on site or responding to the community survey are not necessarily representative of levels of awareness amongst the wider visitor or volunteer base across these sites, this suggests that further work is needed to support sites in raising awareness of the programme.

Although levels of awareness of the National Forest for Wales programme was low amongst visitors and volunteers interviewed on-site, there was a consensus of support for the concept of the National Forest for Wales as a way to plant trees or manage existing woodlands well when this was explained by the evaluation team. This finding is supported by respondents to the community survey with overwhelmingly positive views received on the concept of the National Forest for Wales as a way to establish a nationwide network of woodlands and forests throughout Wales under high-quality management.

Community involvement in woodlands is one of the six National Forest for Wales outcomes. The majority of people responding to the community survey indicated that they had never been consulted about plans for managing the woodland site they visited. Just over a third of community survey respondents indicated that they would like to be consulted in the future. This highlights the potential for site managers to gain the views of and support from communities to assist them in driving forward their woodland management plans.

The main changes observed since sites joined the Status Scheme were paths being made more accessible, trees being removed and an increase in volunteer activities. Four of the case study sites have received funding through TWIG which supports the kinds of changes observed by visitors. As such it is likely that these changes have been funded through their delivery of this grant at these sites. These observed changes reported by community survey respondents are positive given that existing research suggests accessibility is one of the main barriers faced in engaging with woodlands, in particular for older people with mobility issues and disabled people.

Based on responses to the community survey, the case study sites are supporting a range of recreational activities including walking, dog walking, wildlife watching, running, cycling, woodland crafts, and fishing. This illustrates the contribution that the sites are making to policy areas relating to getting people active and adopting healthy lifestyles. Further research could assess the scale of contribution to healthy lifestyles across the network of 72 Status Scheme sites.

All of the eight sites are strongly supported by volunteers. Interviews with site staff and interviews and focus groups with volunteers across seven of the case study sites suggests this volunteer resource is enabling these case study sites to undertake a range of woodland management and community engagement activities, whilst also providing benefits for the volunteers themselves. These volunteers are not commonly aware that their work is supporting their site to contribute to wider National Forest for Wales programme outcomes. This highlights an opportunity to raise awareness of the National Forest for Wales programme and feedback to volunteers on the importance of their contribution.

One theme evident in interviews with visitors across the sites was the appetite for further information on habitats, conversation work and woodland management approaches, including within suitably located interpretation boards. This work is underway at sites in receipt of TWIG funding which is supporting improvements to signage and interpretation at the sites.

Onsite engagement with both visitors and volunteers provided a wealth of information on the benefits delivered for communities across the eight case study sites. These included intrinsic benefits derived from spending time within woodland sites and connecting with nature and instrumental benefits gained from taking part in organised activity or learning new skills.

People responding to the community survey also outlined a wide range of benefits gained from visiting their National Forest for Wales site. Whilst improved physical and mental health were the most prevalent benefits reported, responses highlighted the breadth of benefits. Just over two thirds of community survey respondents stated that their woodland or forest site improved their overall quality of life.

The case study sites include positive examples of partnership working with a range of external organisations to extend the reach into communities and maximise the value of woodland sites for community benefits. They illustrate the breadth of impact on communities that National Forest sites can have. This includes working in partnership with organisations who are engaging and supporting a range of people, including those who may be underrepresented in the profile of visitors to woodland and forest sites. Further examples are evident across the wider network of Status Scheme sites as evidenced in their applications to join the National Forest for Wales network.

There is also evidence of the case study sites enabling and facilitating important work around data collection to support biodiversity objectives using a Citizen Science approach. This approach can provide capacity and skills to capture data to aid understanding about the status of species in a woodland or forest site. The use of this data can inform future work and approaches to support species recovery both across Status Scheme sites and within woodland and forest sites in Wales more broadly. As evidenced in their applications to join the National Forest for Wales network, many of the Status Scheme sites are already using a Citizen Science approach, which demonstrates the likely collective contribution of the programme to biodiversity and species recovery objectives.

One recurring theme emerging from the case study site visits was the importance of sharing practice, learning and knowledge across the programme to support sites in managing their woodlands. This is already in place through the National Forest for Wales Network. Effective sharing can aid sites individually and the programme collectively in delivering against the National Forest for Wales high-level outcomes and the national milestones for Wales.

There was a consensus of support across forestry stakeholders in Wales for the establishment of a nationwide network of woodland and forests throughout Wales under high-quality management. There was strong support for the sharing of learning across the network of sites to continue to underpin their quality management, but also to support advocacy efforts to illustrate the value and contribution of the programme to a range of policy areas.

Feedback from all forestry stakeholders highlighted a desire for further information and insight on how the programme is operating and the range of benefits it is enabling, both at a site level and at a network level. In practice, the network of 72 sites are delivering benefits for communities and for nature and habitats which they set out within their application forms.

A common theme raised to varying degrees in all the forestry stakeholder interviews centred on the availability of resources to support existing sites in managing their woodlands well or prospective sites in undertaking remedial work to get them to a position where they could apply to join the network. Whilst there was recognition that the programme has not been designed to provide ongoing revenue funding to woodland sites that have joined the Status Scheme, it was suggested that sites within the network may require additional funding to enable them and the wider programme to realise its potential. There was no suggestion during these interviews that this funding should necessarily be provided by Welsh Government, but rather that options to support or signpost sites to sources of funding support should be continued as part of the work of the WLO team and through the National Forest for Wales Network.

5.3 Impact evaluation methodologies

Previous research has emphasised the patchy nature of the evidence on the impacts and outcomes of community woodlands and forests. Whilst there has been a shift in focus from solely measuring biophysical impacts to measuring social impacts, monitoring and evaluation can overly focus on measuring outputs rather than the longer-term impacts for people and communities.

The evidence highlighted through engagement with other woodland and forestry programmes and those involved closely in the delivery of the National Forest for Wales programmes suggests that there should be no single approach for measuring social impact. Given the diversity of sites included within the Status Scheme network, the approach to social impact measurement needs to be proportionate to sites in terms of their size, ownership, management structure and capacity and the nature of activities delivered. The parameters of the impact measurement approach adopted for the National Forest for Wales programme should be guided by any policy areas or evidence requirements from Welsh Government, which may need to be reflected in the impact measurement approach adopted.

The indicators and outputs used by the woodland and forest programmes in other areas of the UK described above largely focus on capturing indicators related to activities and outputs. In the absence of these for the National Forest for Wales programme, any impact measurement approach should look to introduce these first to capture some consistent measures of activity and then expand the approach to support the measurement of outcomes and impacts. The experiences from the other woodland and forest programmes across the UK and from the impact measurement workshop highlighted the importance of working with sites and building on existing monitoring and impact measurement activity to ensure that existing efforts are recognised and not duplicated.

There is merit in capturing information from all 72 Status Scheme sites on the number of volunteers they support and the number of volunteering hours donated. Further work could be undertaken to administer a standardised volunteer survey across the sites to explore the positive social impact delivered for volunteers through their work within the National Forest for Wales programme.

There is a growing body of evidence on the benefits of woodland creation, woodland expansion and the management of undermanaged woodland. The National Forest Evidence Review commissioned by Welsh Government draws much of this together and represents a valuable resource that can aid efforts to establish the causal links between the sites that have joined the network and stated outcomes and impacts. More broadly there are a range of evidence sources which articulate the outcomes and impacts of people having a connection with nature or from increasing physical activity and active recreation.

To reflect the breadth and diversity of Status Scheme sites, a tiered approach is likely to be suitable as a framework to structure the social impact measurement approach. All sites should be encouraged to capture basic monitoring and activity data (Level 1) to enable the programme to capture details on the prevalence and distribution of activities and volunteer contributions across the 72 Status Scheme sites.

A smaller number of sites may wish to adopt a measurement approach that helps to expand the evidence base on impact by using case studies and qualitative and descriptive studies (Level 2). This would build on the monitoring and output data captured in Level 1 and focus on using mixed methods approach to capture data on the experiences of visitors, volunteers and participants and the social impacts arising from their engagement with the forest and woodland site. For these sites, their measurement approach would be governed by a Theory of Change for each site.

Subject to the availability of resources, a handful of sites could be assigned as demonstrator sites (Level 3). These sites could create more generalisable evidence than Level 2 by adopting an impact measurement approach at a higher level on the hierarchy of evidence. This would aid the National Forest for Wales programme by using these demonstrator sites to illustrate what the likely social impact are across sites with comparable activities. These sites could adopt a measurement approach based on the use of controlled or uncontrolled cohort studies. Evidence from The National Forest in England and the Active Forests programme suggests there is merit in establishing a research budget to provide capacity and expertise to capture social impacts working in collaboration with sites. The impact measurement approach adopted for the National Forest for Wales programme should seek to accommodate the piloting of appropriate technologies to generate learning and insight.

A key area that needs to be addressed within the programme in relation to impact measurement is central capacity to implement the approach and provide guidance, reassurance and encouragement to sites and coordinate the central collation, processing and analysis of data and evidence submitted.

Given there are 72 sites that have joined the Status Scheme, the potential volume of data and evidence generated should not be underestimated. This includes not only the data gathered across the three impact measurement levels, but also potential evidence from the site's respective woodland management plans and submissions to their woodland and forest accreditation bodies. Drawing on this rich source of programme level data to generate insight, learning and evidence will require sufficient capacity and skills within the programme team. How this function is structured and what resources are provided will need to be agreed by NRW and Welsh Government.

5.4 Recommendations

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

Recommendation 1

A programme level Theory of Change should be produced for National Forest for Wales to provide the high-level architecture for the adopted impact measurement approach.

Recommendation 2

Continued efforts are required to promote and raise the profile of the National Forest for Wales programme and individual sites. This should incorporate resources, support and encouragement to enable sites to promote the programme and its objectives to their respective visitors, volunteers, partner organisations and communities.

Recommendation 3

Considering the important role that volunteers play in the management of Status Scheme sites, the programme should explore options to establish links with the Volunteering Wales Platform. This will assist sites in attracting volunteers to support objectives to improve woodland management and expand recreational opportunities for local communities.

Recommendation 4

To reflect the breadth and diversity of sites a flexible and tiered approach to social impact measurement should be adopted. The programme should provide guidance and resources to aid sites with their own impact measurement activities and consider options to draw on the data and assessment work undertaken by woodland and forest sites for recognised accreditations. The programme should also capture consistent measures of activity across sites before expanding the approach to support the measurement of outcomes and impacts.

Recommendation 5

Based on evidence from other UK forestry programmes, there is merit in establishing a research budget to provide capacity and expertise to capture social impacts working in collaboration with sites. Consideration should be given to the timeframes over which research funding is allocated to avoid producing a baseline position without the necessary funding to update this research in the future.

Recommendation 6

There is strong support for the sharing of learning and practice across Status Scheme sites. This emphasises the value and importance of the National Forest for Wales network. The programme should review the capacity and skills within the programme team to manage the network to ensure that it realises its potential.

Recommendation 7

Clarity should be provided on the future focus of the programme in terms of either seeking to grow the network and number of sites or consolidating the programme to support existing sites. This should consider the implications for the capacity of the WLO team to support sites that have joined the Status Scheme.

Annex A: Fieldwork Plans by Site

Chirk Castle and Garden

Overview

- Regular programme of activities, including group bookings and school visits.

- Supported by a Volunteer Ranger Team, with the National Trust Visitor Engagement Team overseeing activities and engagement.

Approach

- Conducted in-person interviews with two members of the Volunteer Ranger Team.

- Attended a volunteering session with Chester National Trust volunteers (August) and held a focus group (10 participants) to explore engagement with National Forest aspects of the estate.

- Held a further focus group with three regular Chirk Castle volunteers.

- QR code for the survey displayed at the visitor lodge and in woodland areas throughout September.

Mynydd Mawr Community Woods

Overview

- Joint Facebook group with another country park (Llynllydd Owen and Mynydd Mawr); Friends group has 800 members.

- Active Friends group (40 members) visiting daily; recreational use includes walking, mountain biking, and horse riding.

- Tir Coed runs weekly sessions; Coed Lleol delivered activities in 2021–2023 and plans to restart.

- Adjacent primary school (Ysgol Y Tymbl) occasionally uses the woodland.

- Managed by a Ranger Team; car park available.

Approach

- Virtual consultation with Tir Coed staff completed; awaiting contact with Coed Lleol staff (delayed until October).

- Planned consultation with Ysgol Y Tymbl staff after school holidays; contact details requested but not received.

- Online user survey disseminated via Friends group Facebook page; QR code flyer created and displayed on site noticeboards.

- Site visits:

    o 30 August: discussions with Friends group representatives and two participants in Friends Group activity (low turnout due to weather).

    o 24 September: structured discussions with Tir Coed staff and participants.

Stackpole Woodland Estate

Overview

- Supported by two volunteer groups: National Trust volunteers (first Tuesday monthly) and another group visiting monthly.

- Estate includes Stackpole Outdoor Learning Centre (managed externally) and serves as a visitor centre.

- Hosts a range of events: mindful walks, Nordic walking, history walks, foraging, yoga, and family nature crafts.

Approach

- Consultation with Friends of Pembrokeshire Coast National Park completed; other volunteer groups either fundraising only or newly established.

- No contacts yet for event leaders.

- Online survey promoted via site noticeboards, FPCNP newsletter, National Trust Facebook page, and e-bulletin.

- Site visits:

    o 2 September: engaged with four FPCNP volunteers and volunteer manager.

    o Additional visit completed with 20 site user interviews (afternoon/early evening).

Naturewise Community Forest Garden CIC

Overview

- Active on Facebook, Instagram, and website; produces a newsletter.

- Forest garden open Tuesdays and every third Saturday (10am–4pm).

- Supported by 12 volunteers; hosts Eco Shop (open Mon–Sat, 10am–3pm) run by volunteers.

- Engages organisations such as The Lighthouse, Flying Start, and Small World Theatre.

- Open day held in September.

Approach

- Consultations planned with user groups; Flying Start completed, others pending (contacts not received despite follow-up).

- Online survey disseminated via Facebook and QR code during site visit; five responses recorded.

- Site visits:

    - 26 August: structured discussions with Flying Start participants and volunteers.

    - 20 September (open day): engaged six volunteers and six visitors (low turnout due to rain).

Coed y Bont / Coed Dolgoed

Overview

- Managed by Coed y Bont volunteer team; active Facebook page and website.

- Regular volunteer sessions (third Sunday monthly, 6–18 attendees).

- Located on Strata Florida walking trail; popular with dog walkers.

- Facilities include car park, picnic area, and wooden shelter.

Approach

- Online survey disseminated via Facebook; QR code flyer displayed on site noticeboard.

- Site visits:

    - 7 August: engaged seven site users (dog walkers/walkers).

    - 14 September: engaged seven volunteers during session (rain affected turnout).

- Awaiting contact details for local primary school now using site weekly for Forest School activities.

Porthkerry Country Park

Overview

- Owned by Vale of Glamorgan Council; includes woodland, meadows, ponds, and beaches.

- Wales Coastal Path runs through site.

- Woodland management plan guides engagement activities: school visits (approx. three per week during term) and volunteering with Innovate Trust (weekly sessions for adults with learning disabilities).

- Active on Facebook and featured on "Visit the Vale" social media.

Approach

- Interviews conducted with two rangers and Innovate Trust Skills and Wellbeing Team (volunteers unavailable due to staffing issues).

- QR code survey posted around woodland and shared with Friends of Porthkerry group.

- Contact attempts made to three schools for survey dissemination; follow-up emails sent.

- Additional site visit on 25 September to boost survey responses.

Spirit of Llynfi Woodland

Overview

- Established on former industrial site; owned by NRW, managed by local volunteer group.

- Popular with local communities, runners, and dog walkers; features "Keeper of the Colliery" statue.

- Volunteers meet monthly at a nearby fire station; footfall counters recently installed; increasing social media activity.

Approach

- Site visit on 13 September during volunteer day: engaged organiser, one volunteer, and two visitors (poor weather).

- QR codes distributed for survey; awaiting further dissemination options from site manager.

- Follow-up visit on 25 September to boost survey sample.

Sirhowy Hill Woodlands

Overview

- Located on reclaimed spoil and refuse tip (steel industry and household waste until 1970s).

- Managed by a CIC since 2016, comprising local residents.

- Open to walkers; recently introduced grazing cows.

- Offers services such as timber extraction, pruning, thinning, coppicing, and dedicated benches.

- Includes an education area for school engagement; long-term aim is financial sustainability through services and training.

Approach

- Attended Woodland Wonderland Community Engagement Event (7 September): spoke with CIC management and volunteers, distributed survey QR codes to visitors (mainly families).

Annex B: Research Tools

Stakeholder interviews for the evaluation of the National Forest programme

Questions for discussion

1. Please introduce yourself and how you are or have been involved in the National Forest programme. What experience or engagement have you had with the programme?

2. How would you sum up what the National Forest programme overall is trying to achieve?

3. What are your views on the concept of the National Forest as a way to plant trees or manage existing woodland well?

4. What are your views on the progress that the National Forest programme has made from 2022 onwards? Is this in line with your expectations?

5. How does the National Forest programme compare to other forestry programmes? e.g. woodland management/creation schemes, facilitating access for local communities and visitors.

6. From your perspective, what would success look like for the programme in the medium and longer-term? *By medium term we mean by 2030 and longer-term beyond this.*

7. 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?

8. Do you have any views on what the delivery of the National Forest programme should look like post-2025?

9. As the National Forest programme is a long-term commitment, do you have any views on the future focus of the programme in terms of its aims and objectives? Do you think there should be any changes to the focus of the programme post 2025?

10. Finally, do you have any further comments you would like to make in relation to the topics 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?

Evaluation of the National Forest 2023 to 2025: impact measurement

Discussion points

'On the ground' questions

This set of questions is for individuals on the ground managing specific woodland sites.

1. Please introduce yourself and your role.
2. Please provide details of the woodland and forest sites you manage? (e.g. number of sites, total size of sites, diversity of the sites).
3. How is your organisation funded (including grant funding allocated for specific purposes)? What, if any, reporting requirements are attached to the way you are funded?
4. What are your objectives for the management of your woodland and forest sites? Please outline any relevant objectives related to:
    a. People
    b. Nature
    c. Climate
    d. Economy
5. What programmes or activities are delivered across the woodland and forest sites you manage to support outcomes for people (e.g. community events, recreation, volunteering, education)?
6. Do you have a delivery plan and/or a Theory of Change which articulates the aims and objectives that you are working to achieve?
7. What is your approach to measuring the impact of your work across the woodland and forest sites that you manage? Please outline:
    a. What data do you capture? Are these set metrics or qualitative descriptions or a mixture?
    b. How regularly is this captured?
    c. Who captures this?
    d. Do you use citizen science?
    e. How does your approach reflect the diversity of woodland and forest sites? What flexibility exists within your approach?
    f. Are there any gaps in the data?
8. What training or support is provided to sites to aid them in capturing data and evidence to enable their impact to be measured?
9. How does your organisation report and communicate the impact of your woodlands and to whom? If you collect data from multiple sites, how is this brought together?
10. Thinking about your current approach to measuring the impact of managed woodland and forest site activity:
    a. In your view, how effective is this approach? Why do you say that?
    b. Are there any plans to change or improve your approach to evidence gathering? For example, increase the amount of data you capture. Why do you say that?
11. Have you experienced any challenges in measuring the impact of your work? If so, how have these been overcome? (e.g. capacity, data collection systems, data quality)

12. Do you have any suggestions on options to measure the impact of woodland and forest programmes in the future?

Strategic Questions:
This set of questions is aimed at individuals who manage or fund woodland sites. It is likely this includes managing for funding multiple sites.
1. Please introduce yourself and your role.
2. Could you outline the main woodland and forest areas and programmes your organisation funds or manages?
3. What types of woodland and forest sites does your organisation typically fund / manage [dependent on what they answer to question 2 on whether fund or manage is most appropriate]?
   (e.g. number of sites, total area, site diversity)
   a) What are your organisation's strategic goals when it comes to supporting woodland and forest sites? Please outline any relevant objectives related to: People, Nature, Climate & Economy.
4. Does your organisation measure the benefits and impacts of the woodland and forest sites it funds or manages? If so, how [Prompt: Are these set metrics or qualitative descriptions or a mixture]?
   a. Does this vary across different programmes or site types?
   b. How/is site diversity considered in metric setting?
   c. Is there any mandatory data or evidence that must be collected across all funded sites? How/does this accommodate the diversity of sites?
   d. [If yes to 4b] Is any training or guidance provided to support projects in capturing this evidence?
5. Thinking about your current approach to measuring the impact of funded / managed woodland and forest site activity:
   a. In your view, how effective is this approach? Are there any areas for improvement?
   b. Are there any plans to change or improve your approach to evidence gathering? For example, to better report against your organisation's strategic goals?
6. What training or support is provided to sites you fund or manage to aid them in capturing data and evidence to enable their impact to be measured?
7. How is the evidence you collect used or communicated to demonstrate impact at a programme or organisational level? To whom do you communicate this?
8. Do you have any suggestions on options to measure the impact of woodland and forest programmes in the future?

Evaluation of the National Forest 2023 to 2025: engagement with site management staff

Questions for case study sites

1. Please can you introduce yourself and your role in managing the site?
2. What are your views on the concept of the National Forest for Wales as a way to establish a nationwide network of woodlands and forests throughout Wales under high quality management?
3. Has the management of your site changed since it became part of the National Forest for Wales network or as part of preparing to become part of the network? If yes, please provide details (e.g. tree management) and when this was.
4. How/does your site engage and involve communities? Has this changed since you became part of the National Forest for Wales network or as part of preparing to become part of the network? If yes, please confirm when this change happened.
5. To what extent are local people or communities involved in developing ideas for how the woodland is used or managed?
6. Have you taken any steps to connect your site to neighbourhood woodland sites and the wider area? Do you collaborate with other woodland sites? If so, what have you collaborated on (e.g. woodland management, organised recreational activities on site etc)
7. What do you know about the profile of your visitors? (e.g. where do they travel from, peak visit/footfall periods).
8. Have you noticed any changes to visitor numbers since the site has become part of the National Forest for Wales network?
9. What opportunities, if any, have opened for your site since you became part of the National Forest for Wales network?
10. To what extent do you think being part of the National Forest for Wales network has raised the profile of your site?
11. Is there any learning from your experience of being part of the National Forest for Wales so far that could be used to support improvements in the programme in the future?
12. What are your future ambitions for your woodland site? What role do you see for the National Forest for Wales network? How do you think having National Forest status will support you to achieve these ambitions?

Evaluation of the National Forest 2023 to 2025: engagement with volunteers

Questions for volunteers supporting National Forest for Wales sites

Could you tell us a little bit about the following?

1. How long have you been volunteering at the National Forest for Wales site [add name]? How did you come to be a volunteer at the site?
2. What motivated you to volunteer at the site? Why this site specifically?
3. What roles do you undertake at the site? What impact does your volunteering have on this site?
4. Have you heard about the National Forest for Wales?
5. What are your views on the concept of the National Forest for Wales as a way to establish a nationwide network of woodlands and forests throughout Wales under high quality management? Prompt: Are you supportive of this idea?
6. Were you aware that this site is part of the National Forest for Wales? [add date joined]
7. How/does the site engage and involve communities?
8. What changes have you seen at your site since it has become part of the National Forest for Wales network [add date] or as it was preparing to become part of the National Forest for Wales network? For example:
   - Improved access and accessibility
   - Increased profile within the local community
   - Improved facilities on site (e.g. car parking, toilets, community space)
   - Improved community engagement
   - Increased number of community groups, clubs or organisations using the site?
   - Wider range of activities delivered at the site (e.g. wellbeing, education, conservation)
   - Recruitment of more volunteers and/or greater diversity in the profile of volunteers
   - Woodland management changes
   - Practical changes to the site – in terms of equipment, benches, fencing etc
   - Improved conservation methods or biodiversity
   - Improved connectivity
   - More research visible on the site
9. Have you been involved in supporting any of these changes through your volunteer role? If yes, please provide details.
10. How do you think the work you have undertaken as a volunteer has impacted the local community? [prompt: What do you think the effect would be on the site and the community if this volunteering didn't happen?]
11. How have these changes been delivered? For example, through The Woodland Investment Grant (TWIG)/National Lottery Heritage funding.
12. Do you have any suggestions for how the site could strengthen its engagement of the local community?
13. Do you have any suggestions for changes to improve your volunteer role or experience?
14. What have you gained from your volunteering experience at the site? What have been the impacts of volunteering for you?
15. Do you have any questions regarding the evaluation?

Evaluation of the National Forest 2023 to 2025: Volunteer focus group

Volunteer questions / prompts for case study sites

Introduction

1. Could you please give some background around your experience as a site volunteer including why and when you got involved?
    a) Prompts: what were the motivations to getting involved? What roles do you take on?

National Forest for Wales

2. Have you heard about the National Forest for Wales?
3. If yes, what is your understanding of the National Forest for Wales?
    a) Prompts: increasing woodlands, biodiversity, woodlands accessible to people, public access, connected woodlands, community involvement
    b) Prompts: if there isn't a great understanding of the scheme, is there anything that could help to address this?

    [If participants are not aware of the concept of the National Forest or have a clear understanding of it then Wavehill will provide an explanation and seek views on this].
4. Are you aware that as of [add date] this site is part of the National Forest for Wales?
5. Have you seen any changes to the site since it became part of the National Forest for Wales network or as it was preparing to become part of the National Forest for Wales network?
    a) Prompts: around accessibility, local profile, improvements to facilities, public usage, community engagement, increased work/focus of a particular type e.g. biodiversity, conservation, changes to woodland management, increased connectivity, more visible research on site.
6. Have you been involved in supporting any of these changes through your volunteer role? If yes, please provide details.

Impact

7. How do you think the work you have undertaken as a volunteer has impacted the local community? What do you think are the wider impacts of your volunteering work? [prompt: What do you think the effect would be on the site and the community if this volunteering didn't happen?]
8. Do you think any additional changes could be made to improve the positive impact of the site for the local community?
9. How do you think what you are doing is contributing to the National Forest? Were you aware that what you are doing is likely to have supported the site in achieving National Forest status?
10. What have you gained from your volunteering experience at the site? What have been the impacts of volunteering for you?
    a) Prompts: health and wellbeing; education; meeting new people, civic pride

Closing

11. Do you have any other feedback on the site, or on the National Forest for Wales more generally?
    a) Prompt: any areas of improvement, missed opportunities or gaps in support?

12. Is there anything else you'd like to mention, or think should be reflected in our evaluation?

Evaluation of the National Forest 2023 to 2025: Case Study Visit Research Tool

Visits to sites that have joined the National Forest for Wales network

To be completed in advance of the visit
- Visit reference number
- Where we're going
- Woodland site
- A short introduction to the project/activity that we're visiting
- Who's going to be there?
- Why are they there? What are they doing?

Post Visit
- General overview of who was at the 'event', activities undertaken
- Who did you speak to? How many people did you speak to?
- Were you able to speak to a good cross section of participants? If no, why not
- General observations, for example their views on nature
- Did participants talk about any change in their views on nature over the last 12 months? If so, what?
- Did participants talk about any personal benefits of taking part? If so, what? (e.g. skills, health benefits, social connections)
- Did the participants talk about any community benefits of taking part? If so, what?

1. About the National Forest for Wales programme

Questions
- Have you heard about the National Forest for Wales?
  If yes,
    - How did you hear about the National Forest for Wales?
    - What are your views on the concept of the National Forest for Wales as a way to establish a nationwide network of woodlands and forests throughout Wales under high quality management? Were you aware that [site name] is part of the National Forest for Wales?
  If no [Wavehill to outline the concept]
    - Based on this concept, what are your views on the concept of the National Forest for Wales as a way to establish a nationwide network of woodlands and forests throughout Wales under high quality management?

What would help you to gain a better understanding of the National Forest for Wales and the fact that this site is part of it?

2. Experiences with the site

Questions
- How long have you been a visitor/user of [site name]?
- What are your experiences with [site name] since it became part of the National Forest for Wales [add date]?

- Have you noticed any changes to [site name] since it became part of the National Forest for Wales programme in [add date]?
- Do you live locally to [site name]?
- Has the amount of time you spend visiting [site name] or other woodlands or forests changed in the last 12 months, compared to the previous year? If yes, please provide details.

Have you ever been consulted about plans for managing [site name]? If no, would you like to be consulted in the future?

3. What are they doing? (Members of the public, just passing through.)
Questions
- What are you doing here today? E.g. volunteering, recreation, event, learning activity
- How long have you been taking part in this activity?
- What, if any, recreational activities do you undertake when visiting [site name]?
- How do you feel about the activities and opportunities available at [site name] more generally?

Do you think your activity is contributing to this site being a National Forest site and therefore the National Forest for Wales programme? Have you considered the links between what you are doing on site and the site being awarded National Forest status? [Note: only asked for those taking part in an organised activity]

4. Benefits of the site for local communities
Questions
- What do you think are the benefits of [site name] for local communities?
- What benefits have you gained from visiting [site name]?

5. Looking to the Future
Questions
- What would you like to see the National Forest for Wales deliver? Prompt: visitor facilities, activities, volunteering or education opportunities.

Any other comments

Evaluation of the National Forest 2023-2025: Visitor focus group

Visitor questions / prompts for case study sites

Introduction

1. Could you please give some background around what you're doing / participating in today?
   a. Prompt: are they regular or first-time visitors / participants? How did they know about the site / activity? How often do they visit? How long have they been accessing the site?
2. Have you heard about the National Forest for Wales programme?
3. Did you know that this site is part of the National Forest for Wales? What are your views on the concept of the National Forest for Wales as a way to establish a nationwide network of woodlands and forests throughout Wales under high quality management?
4. What are your views on this? Do you think this has had an impact on the site or the people that visit it?

Motivations and benefits

5. What were your motivations around visiting the site / participating in the activity at this site?
   a. Prompt: what do they like about it? if regular visitors / attendants, why do they keep coming back?
6. What do you feel you are getting out of visiting the site / participating in the activity at this site?
   a. Prompt: something to do, wellbeing, connection to nature, exercise, social interaction
7. Do you think your activity is contributing to this site being a National Forest site and therefore the National Forest for Wales programme? Have you considered the links between what you are doing on site and the site being awarded National Forest status? [Note: only asked for those taking part in an organised activity]
8. Do you think that you would be participating in this activity if it wasn't taking place in the woodlands/at this site?
9. What benefits, if any, do you feel that local communities gain from this site and its activity?
   a. Prompt: access to green space, acts as a community setting, drives footfall
   b. Prompt: if benefits aren't felt as much, what could enable them?

Looking to the Future

10. Do you feel that there are any barriers to visiting the site, or getting involved with activities?
    a. Prompt: transport, signage, path quality, lack of accessibility measures, facilities
    b. Prompt: any suggestions around how barriers can be addressed

11. Is there anything else that you would like to see at this site? If so, why?
    a. Prompt: visitor facilities, activities, volunteering or education opportunities

Closing

12. Is there anything else you'd like to mention, or anything you think should be reflected in our evaluation?

Evaluation of the National Forest 2023-2025: Case Study Community Survey Tool

1. Please confirm which of the following woodland sites you have recently visited:

    - Chirk Castle

    - Coed y Bont / Coed Dolgoed

    - Mynydd Mawr Community Woods

    - Naturewise Community Forest Garden

    - Porthkerry Country Park

    - Sirhowy Hill Woodland

    - Spirit of Llynfi Woodlands

    - Stackpole Woodland Estate

2. Have you heard about the National Forest for Wales?

    - Yes
    - No

3. [If yes] How did you hear about the National Forest for Wales?

    - Government website
    - Local media coverage (e.g. TV or radio)
    - Word of mouth
    - Signage at the woodland sites I visit
    - Other (Please state)

The Welsh Government set out its commitment to create a National Forest for Wales in Spring 2020. The National Forest is a national, decades long project with an aim to restore and maintain existing woodland and connect them with new woodland areas through tree planting. The National Forest is being established by creating a network of existing and newly planted woodland sites. You can read more about the National Forest for Wales here.

4. What are your views on the concept of the National Forest for Wales as a way to establish a nationwide network of woodlands and forests throughout Wales under high quality management? Open response

5. What, if any, recreational activities do you undertake when visiting [site name]? Tick all that apply

    - Walking
    - Dog walking
    - Running
    - Wildlife watching
    - Woodland crafts
    - Fishing
    - Cycling/mountain biking
    - Other (Please state)

6. Were you aware that [site name] is part of the National Forest for Wales?
    - Yes
    - No
7. How long have you been a visitor/user of [site name]?
    - Within the last 3 months
    - 3-12 months
    - 1-2 years
    - Over 2 years
    - Don't know/can't recall
8. Have you noticed any changes to [site name] since the [date when the site joined the National Forest] or [date] when they secured The Woodland Investment Grant (TWIG) funding?
    - Paths have been made more accessible
    - Visitor facilities have been improved
    - Activities have been offered on site that were not previously available
    - Planting of trees
    - Removal of trees
    - Increased volunteer activities
    - Increased training or skills sessions available
    - Improved conservation methods or biodiversity
    - Improved connectivity
    - More research visible on the site
    - Other (Please state)
9. Do you live locally to [site name]? (i.e. within 15 minutes walk)
    - Yes
    - No
10. Have you ever been consulted about plans for managing [site name]?
    - Yes
    - No
    - I don't know
11. If no, would you like to be consulted in the future?
12. What benefits, if any, have you gained from visiting [site name]? Tick all that apply:
    - Improved my physical health
    - Improved my mental health
    - Helped me to learn about the environment
    - Provided opportunities for me to take part in a range of recreational or cultural activities
    - Provided space for me to have fun with my friends and/or family
    - Provided opportunities for me to meet new people
    - Improved my overall quality of life
    - Other (Please state)
    - I don't think I've gained any benefits
13. Thinking about forests and woodlands, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

(1) = strongly agree (5) = strongly disagree
1. They contribute to the local economy
2. They are places where people can relax and destress
3. They are places where people can exercise and keep fit
4. They are places where people can have fun and enjoy themselves
5. They are places where people can learn about the environment
6. They are places where people can learn about local culture or history
7. They are important places for wildlife
8. They bring the community together
9. They make areas nicer places to live
10. They get people involved in local issues

(2) What else, if anything, would you like to see at this woodland site?
Open response

(3) Do you have any other comments about [site name]?
Open response