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# National Forest for Wales: Mid-term Evaluation – Phase 2 Report

## Executive summary

### 1. Introduction

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. In June 2024, the Welsh Government commissioned Wavehill to undertake an independent evaluation of the programme. The evaluation covers delivery from September 2022 to October 2025 and uses process and impact evaluation methodologies. This Phase 2 report builds on the work undertaken in [Phase 1 of the evaluation](#) which focused on exploring the effectiveness of the programme delivery mechanisms introduced including, staff roles, funding and the National Forest Status Scheme. This Phase 2 report explores how the National Forest is viewed by communities and members of the public and their experiences since the launch of the Status Scheme in June 2023. It also recommends a design for assessing social impact in the future.

### 2. Methodology

Case studies at a sample of eight National Forest for Wales sites were used to capture and explore community views and experiences. Primary research activities included 17 site visits and semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 16 site management staff, seven external event and activity organisers, 46 volunteers and 83 visitors. A community survey was disseminated through site managers to capture views from a broader range of people which received 137 responses across the eight sites. Views on the progress of the programme and its future focus were also explored through interviews with seven forestry stakeholders in Wales.

A desk-based review of relevant research from comparable woodland and forest programmes from across the UK was used to guide the assessment of what impact evaluation methodologies would be suitable to apply to the programme in the future. Interviews were completed with seven staff members from organisations delivering forestry programmes across the UK to explore how other schemes approach impact measurement, the challenges encountered, and the methodologies used to assess outcomes. An impact measurement workshop was also held involving representatives from the Welsh Government, the Woodland Liaison Officer team based in Natural Resources Wales, and Forest Research to gather views on suitable options for the programme and to explore what would need to be built into the programme to enable future evaluation of its social impact.

### **3. Findings**

#### **Public attitudes to forestry in Wales**

Public attitudes to the National Forest for Wales programme are likely to be influenced by public attitudes to woodland and forests in general which is explored through the Public Opinion of Forestry Survey (POFS) Wales. The [2025 POFS survey findings](#) suggest that continued efforts are required to promote the benefits of woodlands for people, wildlife and the environment. In the view of Wavehill (subsequently referred to as the evaluation team), this emphasises the positive contribution that the programme can provide to promote the benefits of forest and woodland sites and encourage more people to visit them.

#### **How the National Forest is viewed by communities**

On-site interviews with visitors suggest levels of awareness of the National Forest for Wales programme amongst visitors are low. Where volunteers across case study sites 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 with 53% stating that they had heard about the National Forest for Wales. This points to a need to support sites in raising awareness of the programme across their user groups, including visitors and volunteers. 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 across both on-site interviewees and community survey respondents when this was explained to visitors and volunteers.

#### **Experiences of communities so far with National Forest sites**

The main reported changes observed by community survey respondents since the site they had visited 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 The Woodland Investment Grant (TWIG). TWIG was administered as one of the mechanisms of the National Forest for Wales programme and provides support for woodland creation, enhancement,

and restoration. It is likely that these changes have been funded through this grant at these specific sites.

Based on responses to the community survey, the most common recreational activities that visitors undertook at their woodland site were walking, dog walking and wildlife watching. However, the community survey also shows respondents are taking part in a wide range of activities across the eight case study sites including running, cycling, woodland crafts, and fishing.

All of the eight case study 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 sites to undertake a range of woodland management and community engagement activities, whilst also providing benefits for the volunteers themselves. Volunteer involvement at Status Scheme sites has the potential to directly contribute to several of the National Forest for Wales outcomes. This includes directly supporting the National Forest for Wales outcome on enabling 'community involvement in woodlands' as well as the support volunteers provide in providing recreational and learning opportunities for visitors.

Findings from site staff and volunteer interviews highlight the range of activities volunteers undertake across the case study sites to support the management of the site. Their work is supporting the mandatory outcome of 'good quality, well designed and managed resilient woodlands.' However, volunteers on-site commonly reported not being aware that their volunteer work had likely supported the site in contributing to the wider National Forest for Wales programme outcomes.

All visitors and volunteers interviewed at case study 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 public awareness about the initiative.

### **Benefits for communities delivered by National Forest sites**

The main benefits highlighted through both the community survey and qualitative fieldwork with visitors on-site related to improvements to physical and mental health and wellbeing. Community survey responses also showed a wide range of other benefits. Visitors interviewed on site also described benefits experienced from both spending time in woodlands generally and undertaking specific recreational activities on-site. In the view of the evaluation team, this suggests that the 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.

Interviews with site staff and external organisers of activities and events highlight the range of activities being delivered on site and the impacts these activities have on communities. Fieldwork at case study sites illustrated the range of partnership working with organisations who are engaging and supporting people who may be underrepresented in the profile of visitors to woodland and forest sites.

As evidenced in their applications to join the National Forest for Wales network, many of the Status Scheme sites, including the case studies sites, are using a Citizen Science approach, which demonstrates the collective contribution of the programme to biodiversity and species recovery objectives. 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.

### **Aspirations and suggestions for future delivery**

There was a consensus of support across all site staff interviewed 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.

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 illustrate that some sites may require funding to improve their facilities and strengthen the positive impact they are delivering for their local communities.

### **Future opportunities**

All case study sites reported relying on volunteers, particularly to support their woodland management, yet interviews with site owners and volunteers highlighted growing challenges in recruitment. Based on this finding, the evaluation team suggests Status Scheme sites are listed on the Volunteering Wales platform to promote opportunities may be an opportunity for the programme. Further, given the strong focus on health and wellbeing, sites could also be featured on the Dewis Cymru website, which helps people find services to support their wellbeing.

### **Stakeholder views on the National Forest for Wales**

There was a consensus of support across stakeholders involved in forestry policy and practice in Wales for the establishment of the National Forest as a nationwide network of woodland and forests throughout Wales under high-quality management.

A common theme raised 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. 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. 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.

## **4. Impact evaluation approaches**

Any approach to assessing the social impact of the National Forest for Wales programme should complement planned environmental impact assessments and take account of any existing social research being undertaken on sites.

### **Impact evaluation approaches used by other forest sites**

The evidence highlighted through fieldwork with other UK woodland and forestry programmes suggests there should be no single approach for measuring social impact. Given the diversity of sites included within the Status Scheme network, the approach 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 should be guided by any policy areas or evidence requirements from government departments.

The indicators used by the woodland and forest programmes in other areas of the UK 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.

Evidence from other UK woodlands programmes suggests there is merit in establishing a research budget to provide capacity and expertise to capture social impacts working in collaboration with sites.

Using existing evidence sources to identify impacts achieved by comparable woodland and forest programmes as part of an impact measurement approach could support understanding on what likely impacts would be expected from activities delivered at Status Scheme sites. Creating a programme level Theory of Change would provide the high-level architecture for social impact measurement approach and guide any data capture from Status Scheme sites.

### **Accreditations, certifications and standards**

One option for measuring the impact of the National Forest for Wales programme is to draw on the data and assessment work undertaken by woodland and forest sites to support requirements 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 and reduce duplication where they already hold certain accreditations. Further work could be undertaken to understand the extent to which sites hold relevant accreditations, certifications and standards, determine what data is collected by schemes identified and explore their relevance in assessing impact for the National Forest for Wales programme.

## **Valuation tools and frameworks**

Previous research has explored the potential to use a range of valuation sources and appraisal frameworks which may provide options to assess social impacts. It is unclear to what extent forest and woodland owners within the Status Scheme are using comparable valuation and appraisal tools. Understanding use of these tools across sites would help to inform options on future impact measurement for the National Forest for Wales programme.

## **Options for National Forest for Wales**

To reflect the breadth and diversity of sites, a tiered approach is likely to be suitable as a framework to structure the social impact measurement approach. There may be a small number of sites focused solely on delivering environmental outcomes, for which participation in this process may not be appropriate. 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 Status Scheme sites.

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 guide the use of impact case studies and qualitative and descriptive studies to build on the monitoring and output data captured in Level 1.

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.

Sufficient funding and resources will be required within the programme team to collate, process and analyse any data and evidence submitted by Status Scheme sites in relation to their social impact.

## **5. Conclusions**

There is a consensus of support for the concept of the National Forest for Wales programme. The case study sites are supporting a range of recreational activities which illustrates the contribution that the sites are making to policy areas relating to getting people active and adopting healthy lifestyles. The case study sites also include positive examples of partnership working to extend their reach into communities and maximise the value of woodland sites for community benefits.

To reflect the breadth and diversity of Status Scheme sites, a tiered approach for measuring social impact is likely to be suitable. Any impact measurement approach should look to capture some consistent measures of activity and then expand the approach to support the measurement of outcomes and impacts.

## 6. Recommendations

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

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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 Woodland Liaison Officer team to support sites that have joined the Status Scheme.

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Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/national-forest-wales-mid-term-evaluation-phase-2-report>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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