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Sustainable Management Scheme – final evaluation report

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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Sustainable Management Scheme - final evaluation report

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

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Glossary

AONB

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

BPS

Basic Payment Scheme

CBC

County Borough Council

CIC

Community Interest Company

CLLD

Community-led local development

CO2

Carbon Dioxide

COP15

2022 United Nations Biodiversity Conference

COVID-19

Coronavirus Disease 2019

CSCDS

Co-operation and Supply Chain Development Scheme

EAFRD

European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development

ENRaW

Enabling Natural Resources and Well-being in Wales

EU

European Union

Eoi

Expression of Interest

GBF

Global Biodiversity Framework

GHG

Greenhouse Gas

GIS

Geographic Information System

GP

General Practitioner

H2O

Water

HMP

Her Majesty's Prison

INNS

Invasive non-native species

KPI

Key Performance Indicator

NERC

Natural Environment Research Council

NFM

Natural Flood Management

NGO

Non-Governmental Organisation

NLHF

National Lottery Heritage Fund

NNR

National Nature Reserve

NPAP

National Peatland Action Programme

NRP

Natural Resources Policy

NRW

Natural Resources Wales

OECM

Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures

PES

Payments for Environmental Services

QR

Quick Response

RPW

Rural Payments Wales

RSPB

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

SFS

Sustainable Farming Scheme

SoNaRR

State of Natural Resources Report

SMNR

Sustainable Management of our Natural Resources

SMS

Sustainable Management Scheme

SSSI

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

ToC

Theory of Change

UK

United Kingdom

WG

Welsh Government

WG RC-RDP

Welsh Government Rural Communities – Rural Development Programme

WEFO

Welsh European Funding Office

WFGA

Well-being of Future Generations Act

WWF

World Wildlife Fund for Nature

1. Introduction

OB3 Research, in conjunction with BRO Partnership, were appointed by the Welsh Government to undertake an evaluation of the Sustainable Management Scheme (SMS) funded through the Welsh Government Rural Communities-Rural Development Programme (WG RC-RDP) 2014-2020, which is funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the Welsh Government.

1.1. Overview of the Sustainable Management Scheme

The SMS aims to support collaborative landscape-scale projects taking action to deliver nature-based solutions to improve the resilience of our natural resources and ecosystems in a way that delivers benefits to farm businesses and rural communities ^[footnote 1]. The SMS provides financial support for a range of activities that will improve the management of Wales's natural resources and in doing so, contribute to the well-being of rural communities. The scheme offers grants to collaborative groups looking to:

- enhance biodiversity
- improve green infrastructure
- sustain better land and water management and
- facilitate climate change adaptation and mitigation at landscape scale ^[footnote 2]

SMS collaborations include landowners, farmers, and graziers. Projects collaborate with many partners at a local level and at landscape scale to tackle the decline in biodiversity and improve the resilience of ecosystems. ^[footnote 3]

The SMS is delivered under sub-Measure 16.5 of the WG RC-RDP 2014-2020 which is funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the Welsh Government. It is designed to support direct action on managing natural resources across Wales, as part of the Welsh Government's commitment to sustainable development, as set out in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016.

Footnotes

[1] [Sustainable Management Scheme \(Welsh Government\)](#)

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

The SMS is underpinned by the principles of Sustainable Management of Natural Resources (SMNR) as set out in the Environment (Wales) Act 2016:

- manage adaptively by planning, monitoring, reviewing and, where appropriate, changing action
- consider the appropriate spatial scale for action
- promote and engage in collaboration and co-operation
- make appropriate arrangement for public participation in decision-making
- take account of all relevant evidence and gather evidence in respect of uncertainties
- take account of the benefits and intrinsic value of natural resources and ecosystems
- take account of the short, medium, and long-term consequences of actions
- take action to prevent significant damage to ecosystems
- take account of the resilience of ecosystems, in particular the following aspects:
 - diversity between and within ecosystems
 - the connections between and within ecosystems
 - the scale of ecosystems (including their structure and functioning)
 - the adaptability of ecosystems

By the end of the funding period, the SMS, through collaborative landscape scale catchment management projects was expected to deliver actions contributing to the following outcomes:

- increased carbon sequestration
- increased biodiversity
- improved natural flood risk management
- improved soil health and water quality ^[footnote 4]

In addition, the scheme hoped to see an increase in tree planting and management of existing woodlands. Outcomes relating to skills development, job creation and the retention of rural skills, heritage and the Welsh language were also expected. As was a focus on health and wellbeing benefits and supporting community led local development. ^[footnote 5]

Footnotes

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

The funding was available within five separate funding windows.

Table 1.1: SMS Funding windows timelines

	Window 1	Window 2	Window 3	Window 4	Window 5
Application period opened	February 2016	October 2016	July 2017	July 2018	May 2019
Application period closed	May 2015	November 2016	September 2017	September 2018	August 2019
Projects starting	July 2017 to March 2018	June 2018 to July 2019	January 2019 to September 2019	August 2020 to February 2021	February 2021 to November 2021
Projects completing	March 2020 to March 2021 [footnote 6]	March 2021 to June 2022 [footnote 7]	Jan 2022 to March 2023	March 2023 to June 2023	March 2023 to June 2023

Source: Welsh Government

Footnotes

[6] There are exceptions to these dates

[7] There are exceptions to these dates

1.2. Aims of the evaluation

The aim of the evaluation was to review how the SMS delivered its core aims of supporting collaborative action to improve natural resources and helping achieve ecosystem resilience, and to assess its subsequent contribution to sustaining social and economic benefits for communities.

It was intended that the evaluation explore five key objectives:

- the alignment of the funded projects with the principles of SMNR ^[footnote 8]
- the management and implementation of the scheme
- the nature and extent of collaboration and what this achieved
- the outcomes of the scheme and action on the policy priorities
- the contribution projects have made to the cross-cutting themes identified in the Rural Communities-Rural Development Programme, particularly climate adaptation and mitigation

The evaluation was also expected to review the role of the SMS in contributing to the evidence base for the future delivery of new, post-Brexit agri-environmental funding mechanisms.

The evaluation was undertaken between January 2020 and March 2023 and included:

- a first annual update report (November 2020) with a focus on developing a theory of change, logic model and process ^[footnote 9] evaluation ^[footnote 10]
- a second annual update report (November 2021) to update on the findings of the process evaluation and to report on any emerging outcomes and impacts ^[footnote 11]
- this final evaluation report (March 2023) intended to be a full outcomes and impact summative evaluation

Footnotes

[8] Part 1 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 sets out a new framework for the sustainable management of our natural resources (SMNR) comprising a definition of SMNR and the nine principles to achieve it and Wales's Natural Resources Policy (NRP).

[9] A process evaluation is designed to generate findings and recommendations that can help to improve the management and delivery of a project or programme.

[10] [Sustainable Management Scheme: process evaluation and theory of change report \(Welsh Government\)](#)

[11] This report was an internal update document and has not been published.

This report is presented in nine chapters as follows:

- chapter one: this introduction to the report
- chapter two: outlines the study methodology
- chapter three: provides an overview of the recommendations from the previous SMS evaluation update reports
- chapter four: updates the policy and strategic context for the SMS
- chapter five to eight: present the findings of the fieldwork
- chapter nine: presents the conclusions and recommendations for future scheme design

Annex A provides in-depth analysis of 11 SMS projects visited during this fieldwork stage against SMNR principles. Annex B provides details of funded projects, grant amounts and funding periods. Annex C provides the Theory of Change logic model for the SMS. Annex D is a synopsis of the projects interviewed as part of the fieldwork for this final evaluation report. Annexes E-F set out the discussion guides used to gather the evidence, Annex G is the case study template used and the survey is provided at Annex H.

2. Methodology

This chapter sets out the method deployed for undertaking the final evaluation, the profile of those interviewed and discusses some of the key methodological considerations.

2.1. Evaluation activities

The final evaluation stage has involved the following elements of work:

- an inception meeting for this final reporting phase, which included a meeting with Welsh Government officials and the preparation of a refined methodological approach
- reviewing relevant policy and legislative documents
- reviewing scheme monitoring data, the latest available progress reports for each 'live' project and the project level evaluation reports received from fourteen completed SMS projects
- drafting discussion guides for interviews with Welsh Government staff and with project leads and key partners across SMS projects funded in Windows 3-5 (see Annexes E and F)
- developing an online survey for Welsh Government to distribute to all SMS funded projects and analysing 29 responses (see Annex H)
- gathering the views of 43 project leads and key partners across 21 SMS projects funded from Windows 3-5. Fieldwork was undertaken between November 2022 and January 2023. In seven projects, fieldwork was undertaken face-to-face during visits to the projects. For all other projects, fieldwork was undertaken via Teams or phone
- interviewing three members of Welsh Government via Teams
- synthesising the findings of the desk-review and fieldwork
- drafting this final evaluation report

2.2. Review of project level data and evidence

It is a European Commission requirement that progress of projects are monitored and success evaluated following completion. Projects are required to provide regular updates and a final report three months following completion.

SMS guidance at the outset noted that in order to be selected, projects were required to demonstrate their ability to deliver monitoring and evaluation arrangements with a specific focus given to reporting on 'activities to demonstrate the outcomes of the collaborative actions'. Furthermore, the guidance requested that evaluation evidence from projects related to the development of key lessons and recorded experiences of the participations that have been engaged in the collaboration to help to shape future programmes and projects.

From January 2022, the SMS policy team has provided an evaluation toolkit for projects, outlining key research questions that should be answered at project level, information on what the end of project evaluation report should cover and a suggested questioning framework that particularly sought to capture evidence of collaboration; socio-economic, health and wellbeing outcomes; and long-term funding and sustainability.

A total of 15 end-of project evaluation reports were available for review at this final evaluation stage which represents 30% of all projects. All except three of these end-of project evaluation reports are for projects funded in Windows 1 and 2. Only four of the reports were additional to those previously analysed in the second update evaluation report prepared at the end of 2021. A further three documents were provided – one was a mid-term evaluation report (previously analysed) and two additional reflective documents by projects (not prepared by an independent evaluator).

A higher number of end-of-project evaluation reports would have been available if original end dates had remained, but many projects funded in the earlier windows have been through re-evaluation processes that have resulted in extensions to their timescales (and therefore end dates). However, as at end March 2023, 23 SMS projects had reached financial completion stage and should therefore have end of project evaluation reports in place which would have provided 50% more evidence available for analysis.

As part of the desk-based review of evidence, project progress reports have also been considered but the value of this exercise has been limited. Some projects have provided regular progress reports whilst others have only provided one or two progress reports over the course of their delivery. In addition, very little information reported in the progress reports are of value to a summative scheme evaluation, as they mainly report upon progress in relation to activities and spend.

The desk-review also takes into account aggregated monitoring data submitted by individual projects against their RDP case level indicator targets in order to consider overall scheme performance. The RDP guidance, which defined each of these indicators, was shared with projects at the outset of their delivery although the extent to which projects consistently complied with these definitions is not known.

2.3. Online survey

The survey tool captured both qualitative and quantitative data. It was developed with and approved by Welsh Government officials from both the policy and research, monitoring and evaluation teams.

The online survey was distributed directly by the Welsh Government SMS policy team to the lead applicant of each of the 50 funded SMS projects. Three bounce back responses were received by Welsh Government, but these were subsequently re-directed to another suitable individual at the project. A snowball approach was used, with applicants asked to share the online survey more widely amongst delivery partners, delivery team members and volunteers.

Three further reminder emails were distributed by Welsh Government officials to the contact list to boost the response rate and follow-up phone calls made to each project that was not known to have responded. The survey remained open for two and a half months from 15th November 2022 to 31st January 2023.

A total of 29 survey responses were received. All but one were completed in English. One was completed in Welsh.

25 of the 29 respondents volunteered the name of the SMS project which they were associated with. In all 18 projects were named given that some respondents represented the same project. This means that feedback was received via the survey from around a third of SMS projects.

Of the 29 respondents, 12 represented lead application organisations and seven were project delivery team members. The remaining respondents were either delivery partners (seven), volunteers (two) or a project evaluation contractor. Lead application organisations were asked about the status of their project: nine of the 12 had completed their project, one was close to completion and two remained underway at the time of completing the survey.

2.4. Fieldwork interviews

25 projects were chosen for fieldwork during the final evaluation stage. Of these, it was intended that 13 would involve a qualitative interview with project leads whilst the remaining 12 would be in-depth case studies involving a package of interviews with a wider range of contributors.

The sample of 13 projects chosen for qualitative interviews during the final evaluation stage included all projects that had not been invited to contribute to the previous two evaluation update reports. Contact was established with 10 of these projects. Despite several attempts by the evaluation team and the Welsh Government team, it did not prove possible to pin down the remaining three projects, who did not respond to requests.

Table 2.1: SMS projects interviewed for the final evaluation report

Lead Organisation	Project title	Funding window
Radnorshire Wildlife Trust	Restoration of Rhos Pasture	3
Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust	Irfon Catchment Resilient Freshwater Habitat	3
Three Parishes for The Common Good CIC	Three Parishes for The Common Good	4
Camlad Valley SMS CIC	Camlad Valley Project	4
Montgomeryshire Wildlife Trust	Wild Skills Wild Spaces Project	4
Severn Rivers Trust	Nant Alan Land Management	4
Severn Rivers Trust	Cain Valley Sustainable Land Management	4
Snowdonia National Park Authority	Cynefinoedd Cynaliadwy Amaethwyr Mawddwy	5
Cyngor Gwynedd Council	Prosiect Goedlan Glynllifon	5
North Wales Wildlife Trust	Wales Resilient Ecological Network (WaREN 2)	5

Source: Welsh Government

A further 12 projects were chosen in the proposed sample for case study in-depth visits where a range of partners, volunteers and participants provided wider feedback on their experience. Six projects were chosen from earlier funding windows and had already been interviewed for previous reports, with the intention of trying to capture some longer-term outcome data and information. A further six projects were chosen from projects funded in Windows 4 and 5 that had not previously been invited to take part in any qualitative fieldwork.

The twelve projects chosen in the sample covered a range in terms of geographical locations (three each from mid, north, south east and south west Wales), amount of funding awarded (ranging from £252,000 to £818,283) and type of lead organisation (e.g., trust, third sector charity or public sector organisation). Fieldwork visits were conducted with nine of the twelve projects sampled. A Teams interview with the project lead only was achieved with a further two projects. 32 interviews were held across these case study projects in total.

Table 2.2: SMS case study projects contributing to the final evaluation report

Lead Organisation	Project title	Funding window
Partneriaeth Pennal	Pennal 2050	2
Caerphilly County Borough Council	Caerffili Landscape Partnership	2
Cwm Arian Renewable Energy	Growing Better Connections	3
RSPB	Sustaining the Gwent Levels	3
Talley Community Amenity Association	Local LAND Project – Talley and Cwmttydu	4
Gelligaer and Merthyr	Cydweithredu Comin-Common Collaboration	4
Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust	Cors Caron	5
Maesmawr Group Limited	People and Nature – Working Together	5
North Wales Wildlife Trust	Woodlands for Water	5
Cyngor Gwynedd Council	Dawnsio ar y Dibyn	5
Grŵp Elenydd Cyf	Natural Solutions in Elenydd	5

Source: Welsh Government

For stakeholder interviews to be conducted as part of this update report, contact details were requested from Welsh Government. A total of nine Welsh Government contacts were provided as possible interviewees who might wish to contribute to this stage of the evaluation. Of these, three were interviewed, four declined to take part on the basis that they did not feel they had any further contribution to make having contributed to previous phases of the evaluation, and no response was received from the remaining two contacts.

Notes from the in-depth interviews were analysed by thematic analysis, using the headings from the discussion guide initially, and identifying patterns and commonalities across the responses received to generate the key findings throughout this report. These findings, where possible, have been cross-referenced across end-of project reports and qualitative responses from the online survey.

2.5. Methodological considerations

The following issues need to be considered in relation to the methodology adopted for this study:

- ensuring SMS funded project staff responded to the survey or agreed to be interviewed proved challenging throughout this final evaluation stage, even though project leads were contacted regularly for interview over a three-month period with Welsh Government also issuing several reminders and chase-ups on our behalf. In some cases, individuals had moved on or the project had closed, and staff were no longer in place. In other instances, staff declined the opportunity to take part due to outstanding claims or other issues they had with the SMS scheme more widely precluding them from wishing to take part
- the online survey was sent out to all main project contacts directly by Welsh Government rather than by the evaluation team due to GDPR restrictions. Although every attempt was made by the Welsh Government's team to boost the response rate, it remained low at a third of all funded projects (in line with the response rate seen across the previous two evaluation reporting stages)
- a more detailed breakdown of scheme level data and output evidence for funded SMS projects has been provided for the final evaluation report stage. Progress to date against spend for individual projects has also been provided this time, whereas it has not previously been made available to us
- whilst 15 end-of-project evaluation reports have been provided to us for analysis at the time of drafting this final evaluation report, these reports are of varying quality and mostly concentrate on the reporting of activities and the outputs of funded projects. Less than half provide detailed evidence of outcomes
- as only 30% of end-of project evaluation reports are available, this inevitably impacts on the ability of this final evaluation report to draw conclusions as to the performance of the SMS scheme as a whole, although every effort is made to comment on the performance of completed projects

- whilst this final report can consider evidence of outcomes in relation to collaboration, social and economic outcomes, it remains the case that it cannot be expected that environmental outcomes can be achieved within project delivery timeframes. Many of the Window 4 and 5 projects interviewed have had shorter delivery timeframes in which to deliver their projects (averaging 1 year 11 months in Window 5 compared to 3 years 11 months for projects funded in Window 1) which also impacts upon their ability to fully realise their potential outcomes
- finally, the design of the SMS scheme from the outset was a bottom-up flexible approach that allowed projects to set numerical targets and report against RDP case level indicators which were relevant to them, ensuring that they selected at least two such indicators. An analysis of case level indicators selected by 50 SMS projects shows that they adopted on average just over six indicators each. Given that some projects were still ongoing at the time of the fieldwork we have considered the overall scheme performance to date against the targets set by all projects as well as the final outputs of completed projects. The latter provides a more accurate indication of scheme performance

Due to the above methodological issues, which have been consistent across the three evaluation periods, this final evaluation report remains heavily reliant on qualitative feedback and views from project representatives interviewed. This scheme-level evaluation does not have access to enough high-quality project-level evaluation evidence that can be verified or backed up by data or documented evidence in many cases.

Notwithstanding the above methodological considerations, this final evaluation report across all the methodological approaches undertaken – survey responses, interviews, in-depth visits, and analysis of documentary evidence – has analysed information gathered from 38 of the 50 (or three quarters of) funded SMS projects in some format ^[footnote 12].

Footnotes

[12] Duplication of responses across the various methodological approaches has been considered.

3. Overview of SMS evaluation findings to date

In this chapter we briefly set out the key recommendations offered in the first evaluation update report in 2020 and the second evaluation update report from the end of 2021. A more detailed synopsis of the key findings and recommendations from both previous reports can be found in Annex B.

3.1. 2020 Evaluation Update Report

The first update report was a process report which outlined the theory of change to be used in this evaluation (see Annex C for the SMS Theory of Change logic model developed).

The 2020 evaluation update report offered eight recommendations for the Welsh Government to consider for the remaining delivery period of the SMS scheme and wider recommendations that might help inform future funding approaches. They are outlined in Figure 3.1 below:

Figure 3.1: Recommendations from the 2020 SMS evaluation update report

Recommendation 1: Key lessons in terms of policy design for landscape scale collaborative projects should be taken on board in any future funding mechanisms. The findings and early results of this evaluation report should be shared with Welsh Government policy officials who are currently drawing up the structure for the future funding of farming in Wales.

Recommendation 2: The Welsh Government should continue to ensure that future funding mechanisms for agri-environment schemes build on the innovative and flexible collaborative approach of the SMS but consider adopting a 5+ year delivery timescale for such grant schemes in future.

Recommendation 3: Several key learning points have emerged from the SMS' EoI and application process that need to be considered when developing an application process for any future funding scheme, including:

- a need for a shorter EoI process (no more than 15 pages long)
- a six-to-12-month development phase prior to a full three-year delivery phase
- an assessment process that assesses the whole application rather than individual sections
- greater involvement of NRW in the assessment process, to ensure alignment with regional priorities
- dates for funding windows to be outlined from the outset and adhered to
- swift turnaround from successful application to awarding of funding

Recommendation 4: The facilitation support role should be provided from the outset of a funding scheme in future and its remit extended to help projects bridge the gap and make the transition from application to delivery phase. Facilitators could undertake a quasi-project management role within

collaborative projects that are not led by a public authority or NGO until the project management team are appointed.

Recommendation 5: Regional peer-to-peer networking between SMS projects to share learning and experiences needs to be facilitated and encouraged by Welsh Government. These sessions should be regular sessions (at least quarterly in each region), held on-site where possible, and include both Welsh Government and NRW input.

Recommendation 6: Opportunities for greater engagement between the SMS and NRW should also be fully explored. A policy seminar for NRW staff to disseminate the early lessons from the SMS would enable a greater understanding of the scheme. Welsh Government should also consider ways of encouraging a more consistent level of engagement of NRW with all SMS projects across Wales.

Recommendation 7: Capacity within the Welsh Government policy team should be increased so that the sufficient staff time and resources are made available to deliver the support required for such a range of complex and varied SMS funded projects for the remaining period.

Recommendation 8: The current RPW claims procedure needs to be reviewed and adapted immediately so that it can be more responsive to the needs of the SMS. Training should be arranged to ensure all Welsh Government staff involved with claims understand the nature of landscape scale grant schemes and the implications of delays on delivery. Consideration should be given to establishing a dedicated team within RPW to allow more streamlined assessment and approval processes, and a dedicated individual allocated to each SMS project to respond promptly to queries.

3.2. 2021 Evaluation Update Report

The unpublished evaluation update report submitted to Welsh Government at the end of 2021 set out some further conclusions and recommendations in line with the key objectives set for the evaluation.

The 2021 evaluation update report included six recommendations for the Welsh Government to consider:

Figure 3.2: Recommendations from the 2021 SMS evaluation update report

Recommendation 1: Welsh Government should consider developing a clear end of project checklist for funded projects to ensure that the data, information, and evidence can be provided in high-quality end of project evaluations that provide robust analysis of project level outcomes and impacts.

Recommendation 2: Verifiable data relating to the outputs of SMS projects, and data relating to the delivery and financial management of the scheme needs to be shared regularly and in a timely manner by RPW with both the Welsh Government policy team, and thereafter, with the scheme's evaluation team.

Recommendation 3: RPW should adapt their approach to claims reprofiling to avoid any further delays in project spend. This should include a process whereby project leads can discuss issues in person so that any matters raised can be resolved swiftly.

Recommendation 4: Early concerns have been raised that some of the environmental benefits generated by SMS projects will be lost without annual maintenance. As such, the provision of a maintenance funding pot should be considered as an ongoing legacy of the grant scheme.

Recommendation 5: The delays experienced by the SMS and the lack of clarity in terms of required reporting of outputs and outcomes means that there has been very little evidence to consider to date. There would be merit in revisiting the methodology and the timing for the final scheme level evaluation report, to improve the opportunity to robustly analyse all possible evidence sources that will be available towards the end of the funding scheme.

Recommendation 6: In terms of specific learning for future funding approaches, the current SMS delivery model is not working.

Whilst the design principles of the SMS have adhered to the principles of SMNR, any future fund also needs its grant administration processes to be structured in a way that reflect the scheme's objectives and is in keeping with SMNR principles. It should:

- be managed by a single team with the same management responsibility for design, delivery, and monitoring
- be flexible and responsive to changes during the project lifetime, and be commensurate with funding expectation
- be informed by an outcomes-led framework that has been clearly set out from the outset
- set up grant administration processes that reflect the funding objectives and bespoke needs of partnership-led collaborative projects
- provide ongoing facilitation support for farmer-led, community grown partnerships
- provide long-term funding stability over at least four full years

4. Policy context

This section provides a brief update on relevant policy developments since the SMS was initially designed.

4.1. Programme for Government 2021-2026

The Welsh Government's new programme for this five-year cycle highlights the need to 'embed our response to the climate and nature emergency in everything we do' ^[footnote 13]. It also recognises the need to 'deliver a green transformation which starts in our local communities' and to 'integrate positive action for nature into more of our economic activity' ^[footnote 14]. Specific objectives of relevance to the SMS include the commitment to:

- harness the economic, cultural, and recreational potential of the National Forest as part of progress towards a sustainable timber industry
- create a new system of farm support that will maximise the protective power of nature through farming
- expand arrangements to create or significantly enhance green spaces ^[footnote 15]

4.2. Agriculture (Wales) White Paper ^[footnote 16]

In December 2020, the Welsh Government announced the publication of its Agriculture (Wales) White Paper which set out their plans for the biggest change in agriculture policy for decades, with the intention of setting primary legislation during this current Senedd term (2021-26).

The White Paper recognises the role of the agriculture sector in responding to the climate and ecological emergency and presents a future system of support that is based on the principles of Sustainable Land Management.

The White Paper outlines how Sustainable Land Management would provide the overarching framework for future policy and support, rewarding farmers for the sustainable production of food and for their contribution to the health and well-being of Wales. The White Paper sets an intention to offer a single direct support scheme for farming which would replace the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) and the other EU agri-environment schemes currently in place.

This Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) would reward farmers to produce additional non-market goods including improved soils, clean air, clean water, improved habitat condition and actions to reduce global warming.

Footnotes

[13] Welsh Government (2021), Programme for Government 2021-2026, p.4

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] [Agriculture \(Wales\) Bill \(Welsh Government\)](#)

Following a consultation on the Agriculture (Wales) White Paper which closed in March 2021, Welsh Government issued a policy response and its forward plan leading to the proposed launch of the Sustainable Farming Scheme in 2025.

4.3. Agriculture (Wales) Bill 2022

The draft Agriculture Bill was laid before the Senedd in September 2022.

The Bill establishes Sustainable Land Management as the legislative framework for future agricultural policy. It is a 'made in Wales' policy framework which focusses on supporting farmers to produce food sustainably alongside taking action to respond to climate and nature emergencies and contributing to thriving rural communities.

4.4. Sustainable Farming Scheme

During the initial phase of co-design to allow farmers, landowners, NGOs, and stakeholders to engage with the development of the Sustainable Farming Scheme it was announced that it would consist of three levels:

- a universal element which all farmers can access
- higher level payment where more funding is provided for greater actions
- additional payments for collaborative actions

Further detail on the development of the new Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) were published in July 2022 for a second co-design phase.

The scheme has been designed to support farmers to deliver on four key objectives:

- to produce food in a sustainable manner
- mitigate and adapt to climate change
- maintain and enhance the resilience of ecosystems and the benefits they provide
- conserve and enhance the countryside and cultural resources, promoting public access and engagement with them ^[footnote 17]

The scheme recognises that these objectives must be delivered together and intends to do so by taking a 'land sharing' approach which means that environmental and social outcomes are delivered through the adoption of sustainable farming practices.

Footnotes

[17] Welsh Government (2022), Sustainable Farming Scheme Outline Proposals for 2025, p. 9

The document outlines three layers to the Scheme, one of which is ‘Collaborative Actions’ to be carried out in a coordinated way by multiple farmers or land managers at a landscape, catchment, or national scale so that greater benefits than the sum of individual parts can be delivered. Examples of such collaborative actions include creating interconnected habitats, developing supply chain opportunities, and sharing knowledge and innovation ^[footnote 18]. It recognises that collaborative actions will often require farmers, land managers and other individuals who are not part of the Scheme to be involved in joint projects.

It highlights the likely need for a third-party organisation, facilitator, or support structure to bring together the different farmers, land managers and individuals to enable successful delivery and states that experience from other projects is being utilised to understand the role that advisors and facilitators can take in supporting both individual and collaborative decision making ^[footnote 19].

Furthermore, it states that it will ‘build on the success of RPW Online and its geo-spatial applications’ so that the opportunities available to the farmer can be shown both in terms of ‘financial gains and environmental outcomes.’^[footnote 20]

Several proposed actions have been identified within the SFS which provide opportunities for collaborative action including:

- reduce on-farm emissions and maximise carbon sequestration (including the restoration of semi-natural peatland and the creation and management of existing agri-forestry and woodland)
- protect and enhance the farm ecosystem (including protecting soils from erosion and degradation and preserving native breeds)
- manage habitats and species (including habitat maintenance and creation, benefiting habitat on improved land, designated sites, lowering the risk of diffuse pollution and natural flood management)
- benefit people, animals, and places (including maintaining the historic environment, heritage and beauty and enabling people to engage with and access the natural environment) ^[footnote 21]

Footnotes

[18] Ibid. p.15

[19] Ibid. p.60

[20] Ibid. p.61

[21] Ibid. p. 19-56

If farmers wish to be part of the scheme, they will be required to complete a Sustainability Review and join the Scheme via RPW Online. There will be separate eligibility criteria for the Collaborative layer of the Scheme, recognising that this element will require joint projects. The proposed eligibility criteria will be explored in due course.

The current policy thinking, set out in the document, is that of a Prepare and Pilot Phase (2022-24) to help prepare farmers to be in the best position to enter the SFS. In the meantime, the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) and Glastir will continue, in addition to a framework of additional funding for the transition phase. 2025-2029 will be the Transition Period as BPS is phased out ^[footnote 22].

Footnotes

[22] Ibid. p.64-65

4.5. COP 15 Global Biodiversity Framework

The United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP15) held in Canada in December 2022 concluded with an agreement to guide global action on nature through to 2030 ^[footnote 23]. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) sets out measures to halt and reverse nature loss, including putting 30% of the planet and 30% of degraded ecosystems under protection by 2030.

The GBF consists of four overarching global goals and 23 targets. The four goals set out a vision for biodiversity by 2050:

- substantially increase the area of natural ecosystems by maintaining, enhancing, or restoring the integrity, connectivity, and resilience of all ecosystems
- ensure nature's contributions to people are valued, maintained, and enhanced, with those contributions currently in decline being restored
- share the monetary and non-monetary benefits of the utilisation of genetic resources
- ensure all parties (specifically developing countries) have adequate means to implement the GBF resources

Footnotes

[23] [COP15: Nations Adopt Four Goals, 23 Targets for 2030 In Landmark UN Biodiversity Agreement \(Convention on Biological Diversity \(cbd.int\)\)](#)

The global targets for 2030 include:

- effective conservation and management of at least 30% of the world's lands, inland waters, coastal areas, and oceans, with emphasis on areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functioning and services. This has been informally referred to as the '30 by 30' deal
- reduce global food waste by half and significantly reduce over-consumption and waste generation
- reduce by half both excess nutrients and the overall risk posed by pesticides and highly hazardous chemicals
- progressively phase out or reform subsidies that harm biodiversity by at least \$500bn per year, whilst scaling up positive incentives for biodiversity conservation
- encourage at least \$200bn per year in domestic and international biodiversity-related funding from public and private sources
- increase international financial flows from developed to developing countries by at least \$20bn per year by 2025, and to at least \$30bn per year by 2030
- require transnational companies and financial institutions to monitor, assess and disclose the impact on biodiversity of their operations, supply chains and portfolios

4.6. The Biodiversity Deep Dive

In anticipation of the COP15 agreement, the Welsh Government worked with a group of key experts to undertake a Biodiversity Deep Dive over the summer of 2022. The group was tasked to develop actions which Wales could take to support the recovery of nature, and to achieve the goal of protecting 30% of land, freshwater, and sea for nature by 2030. This goal is one of the targets which form part of the COP15 GBF adopted in December 2022.

In a written statement on the work of the Biodiversity Deep Dive ^[footnote 24] (October 2022) the Minister for Climate Change Julie James MS announced the collective actions which Wales could take to support nature recovery. In total eight recommendations ^[footnote 25] were offered:

- transform the protected sites series so that it is better, bigger, and more effectively connected
- create a framework to recognise Nature Recovery Exemplar Areas and Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs) that deliver biodiversity outcomes
- unlock the potential of designated landscapes (National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty) to deliver more for nature and 30 by 30
- continue to reform land and marine management and planning (including spatial) to deliver more for both protected sites and wider land / seascapes
- build a strong foundation for future delivery through capacity building, behaviour change, awareness raising and skills development
- unlock public and private finance to deliver for nature at far greater scale and pace
- develop and adapt monitoring and evidence frameworks to measure progress towards the 30x30 target and guide prioritisation of action
- embed Nature Recovery in policy and strategy in public bodies in Wales

Footnotes

[24] [Written Statement: Biodiversity Deep Dive \(3 October 2022\) \(Welsh Government\)](#)

[25] [Biodiversity deep dive: recommendations \[HTML\] \(Welsh Government\)](#)

5. Key findings: implementation of the SMS

This chapter sets out the feedback received from projects during interviews and via survey responses in relation to their ability to implement their projects as intended and to manage adaptively. It also reports the views of projects, funded in the final three funding windows, on Welsh Government's monitoring and management of the scheme – in terms of both RPW and the policy team's respective roles. This section also outlines project's views on the key ingredients needed to realise a collaborative project on a landscape scale effectively and efficiently.

5.1. Ability to deliver projects as planned

The 21 projects interviewed during this round of the evaluation cited similar issues and reasons to those mentioned in previous evaluation update reports that had impacted on their ability to deliver as planned.

Three-quarters of the funded projects (15) stated that administrative issues had made it challenging for the projects to be delivered as planned. These challenges were described as:

- shorter window for delivery
- procurement approval delays
- cashflow challenges and
- other administrative delays - including a delay in re-profiling due to administrative error, delays in seeking agreement from NRW on land use and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) consent (2) and a delay in obtaining planning permission locally (2)

Almost half of projects interviewed (10) experienced initial approval delays to allow their project to commence. In two of these instances, the projects were led by a local authority and a large trust that had decided to proceed at risk and use their match funding to kick-off capital works. However, smaller trusts and community interest groups had not been in a financial position to do this and had been squeezed into an even shorter window for delivery as a result. All Window 5 funded projects interviewed mentioned how their shorter delivery period (often no more than eighteen months as opposed to the expected three years) had made it impossible to deliver all the ambitions of their original plan. In one example, the project estimated that around £80k of work was not going to be delivered.

Cashflow and procurement challenges were raised by projects led by smaller trusts. The inability to afford to start a project 'at risk' resulted in a two-year delay in reaching final approval for one project and six months for another. Delays in claims processing had resulted in one trust being unable to pay contractors and even the salary of their own project officer for a period time whilst waiting for claims to be settled (with lengthy delays awaiting approval).

The COVID-19 pandemic was the issue mentioned by more than half (11/21) of projects interviewed, with those from Windows 2-4 more likely to raise this as a reason for having to adapt than those in Window 5 (since their approval and delivery timescale was more likely to fall within the period where there were more severe restrictions in place). The pandemic had impacted projects in different ways. Some described how it had reduced their ability to run training sessions, community activities or events. However, in one case, whilst COVID-19 had reduced their ability to deliver, it had also had a positive effect in galvanising community action resulting in more local people becoming involved.

A third of projects (7 of 21) felt that it had proven harder to engage with landowners or the local community than they had originally envisaged. Several reasons were provided as to why this was the case including:

- initial delays resulting in loss of interest, faith, and momentum
- farmers and landowners under increasing pressures and less willing to contribute time or money
- developing relationships with stakeholders takes longer to develop than anticipated
- loss of internal staff to undertake engagement activities
- pandemic related restrictions making it more difficult to bring people together

Three projects funded through Window 5 believed that Brexit had impacted on the ability to deliver their project as planned, with contractors deciding to withdraw from working in Wales and materials becoming more difficult to source. Two projects (both funded in Window 5) mentioned how rising costs and price increases had impacted on their ability to deliver – contractors were busy, and the cost of materials were rising on an almost monthly basis. These projects also experienced delays in procurement approvals which only exacerbated the situation further. Two projects stated that the weather had impacted on their ability to deliver as planned.

5.2. Effectiveness of Welsh Government management and monitoring

Comments made by interviewed project leads or raised in end-of-project evaluation reports about the management and monitoring of the SMS broadly covered two themes, which we discuss here in turn.

Firstly, over half (18 of 33) mentioned issues around SMS claims, continuing with similar feedback that has been reported from the outset of the scheme's evaluation. Project leads complained that:

- the RPW system is 'difficult,' 'complicated,' 'extremely frustrating' and 'not intuitive' (8)
- 'goalposts' (or guidance and rules) seem to constantly change, projects receive conflicting advice from different RPW officers, or waiting for weeks to receive responses to questions causing further delays (8)
- claims are still said to take a long time to process, are often 'on hold' and 'not paid promptly' (7)
- project officers have ended up spending a lot of time on the administration of claims making the project more inefficient (4)
- delays in getting approval meant that the relationship between the project and the funder was 'undermined from the start' (3)

'you spend two days a week working on the administrative procedures...it's two steps forward, three back...it's soul destroying'
- RPW routinely come back to projects for additional information (2)
- projects are only able to submit one claim at a time (2) which has a negative impact on cash flow

Several interviewed project leads suggested that the situation had become worse of late, with the auditing system changing last year. It was now even harder to submit claims, with an even longer wait time for processing. Similarly, four interviewed project leads mentioned changes to procurement rules and special conditions making it more cumbersome. They described a procurement process which required a form and an application process for all spend over £500 that may have been prompted by the EU audit. A perceived backlog at RPW in dealing with procurement claims also seems to have had a knock-on impact on claims processing.

Three project leads mentioned how staff had been helpful and 'invariably supportive' when they had managed to speak with an individual at RPW but the system itself was causing 'massive problems.' Two projects highlighted how the upfront (20%) payment had been useful and three projects suggested that either online training sessions to better understand the RPW system or/and a dedicated case officer allocated to each project from the outset might have alleviated the situation somewhat.

Smaller projects have struggled hugely with the demands placed upon them. One respondent described how they expected a level of trust once the funding had been allocated to them, and being judged on the results:

“There is constant interference, raising the bar and more and more hoops to jump through. There have been times when there has been no money to pay staff. We are doing everything right and being scrupulous in our financial activities but we’re not being trusted by Welsh Government”.

Four respondents from larger organisations, with experience of European funding and previous grant claims systems described how their experience with the SMS had been different to any previous scheme and harder than expected in terms of the bureaucratic set-up and workload emanating from it. They voiced similar frustrations at not being trusted:

“We’ve been waiting nine months for a claim to be processed. We are a large authority so we can absorb waiting for over a hundred thousand pounds to be paid – but imagine if this had been on the farmers! This project would have collapsed. The whole WEFO claims system is ineffective. It’s impossible. As an authority our audit systems should count for something. There should be trust in us.”

Data received from RPW on claims processing times in relation to SMS-funded projects show that it took 46 days on average to process claims. This varied from a two-day turnaround period to 264 days to process claims. The data shows that in the case of 11 of the 50 projects, the processing time was less than 30 days. In seven cases, project claims took longer than 60 days to process. The data provided is caveated by a statement that the processing times is that of a claim being within the information management system used by RPW. It excludes the time a claim was put on hold. Claims would be put on hold if customers raised a claim validation query. As such, it is difficult to ascertain the total amount of time some projects would have had to wait for claims to be processed (including time on hold whilst raising queries), but it is clear that in some instances, there was a very lengthy (and unacceptable) period of time for projects to await payment.

Secondly, over half (16) – and mostly from Window 4 or later - suggested that their sole relationship with SMS was via RPW and that the relationship with the policy team could be improved. Four projects reported very little or no support or contact from the Welsh Government policy team. Two respondents recalled attending a Rural Networks event in June 2022 and speaking with a member of the SMS policy team about future funding opportunities.

“We felt very isolated doing the SMS.”

“Ideally we should have a dedicated case officer, like the Lottery, who can deal with us.”

Feedback gathered from end-of project evaluation reports (6) suggested that sharing ideas, knowledge and expertise across projects had been lacking and an opportunity missed to promote more connections between SMS projects and the emerging pilots that should be a priority for the new SFS funding.

Three projects described a very good relationship with the policy team and mentioned one individual in particular who had been supportive. They described how meeting with a policy lead from Welsh Government had been interesting and had made them feel valued. Four projects suggested that Welsh Government's policy team seemed to have 'lost interest' in the SMS and did not have the expected capacity to be able to engage with projects.

5.3. Key ingredients of effective and efficient landscape scale collaborative projects

Interviewed project leads highlighted several lessons from their experience in delivering collaborative projects on a landscape scale.

Four fifths (16) of those interviewed raised the importance of flexibility and trust. Flexibility was seen as a key SMNR principle that projects wished that the SMS scheme had adhered to. Project leads suggested that more flexibility to shift monies from one funding heading to another (without crossing over between revenue and capital) without requiring permission would be useful. This would enable projects to respond to local needs as they arose and would better meet the SMNR principle of adaptive local planning and management.

Almost three quarters (14) also stated that better administrative systems and clearer guidance is needed so that projects can focus on the delivery aspects associated with their projects.

Half (10) of all those interviewed highlighted the importance of strong project management, clear and robust planning procedures:

“An experienced and knowledgeable facilitator and a project manager with a positive approach and bags of persistence have been invaluable.”

“You need a clear idea of what you are trying to achieve – clear objectives.”

“You need lots of project officer time, and experienced people who understand farmers and landowners.”

“The initial idea has to be strong. You need clear objectives that you can deliver against.”

A similar number (9) also mentioned the importance of a longer funding period. One project described how it had taken five years to get the collaborative partnership together, but only two years were then available to deliver: 'ideally it should be the other way around'. Others suggested that long-term, sustainable core funding (2) was the only real answer.

Four fifths of interviewed project leads (16) pointed to how crucial strong, well-established partnerships were to successful collaboration. Project leads reiterated how much time it takes to develop trust and get farmers and landowners involved in collaborative projects, particularly those who can be initially suspicious of public sector organisations. One project described how much of their work, which needed to be delivered on private land would not have been possible without engaged and willing stakeholders. To reach that stage, each farm had received an advisory visit from the lead organisation to reach agreement, with

bespoke plans set out for each landowner which, when looked at collectively created a network of complementary actions across the landscape. Another project lead spoke of the time taken to speak to the community and to understand that there are different voices and opinions within a community that require consideration to arrive at an agreed approach and way forward.

Some project leads felt that support from the outside was a key factor in enabling landscape scale collaborative efforts. For example, the need for regular interaction with Welsh Government (6) and ongoing support of a facilitator at grass-roots level throughout the project duration (2) was raised.

If the SMS scheme was designed anew, project leads suggested that maintaining a focus on SMNR principles had been the right approach and felt that this should continue (8). Almost half (9) would like to see a longer funding period – ideally around five years or longer to enable projects to be embedded and to deliver greater outcomes. One fifth of respondents felt that the focus should be on environmental rather than socio-economic outcomes. Other suggestions for the future included:

- standard payments or greater upfront payments to be made to projects (3)
- re-considering whether projects of this nature should be farm-led (2) due to the administrative demands and
- keeping or even strengthening the EoI stage of the application process (2)

6. Key findings: collaboration and sustainability

This section sets out the key findings in relation to the value and effectiveness achieved from the collaborative partnerships delivering SMS projects and explores some of the benefits achieved and challenges faced by these collaborative working approaches. It also considers the extent to which collaborative projects have aligned with the nine SMNR principles, and evidence of how partnerships and their achievements are likely to be sustained into the future.

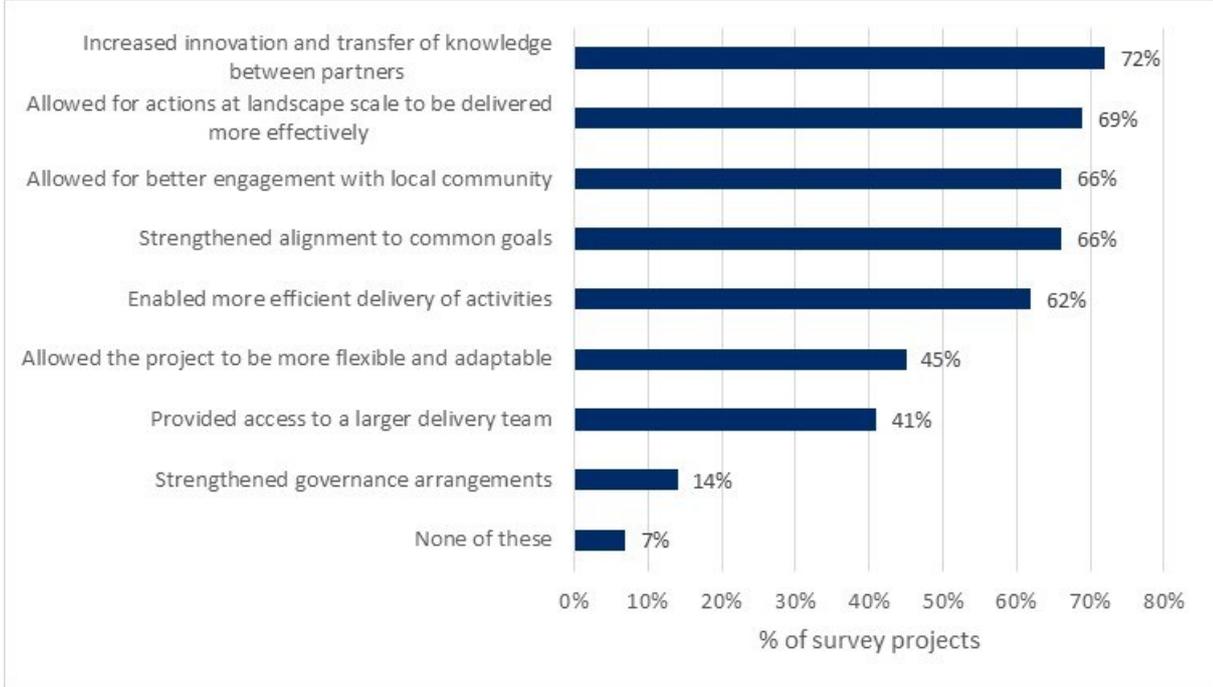
6.1. Value and effectiveness of partnerships and collaborations

Lead organisation survey respondents reported that they had mostly collaborated with third sector organisations (10 or 83%), followed by non-governmental organisations (9 or 75%). Fewer had collaborated with National Park Authorities or AONBs (four or 25%) or local authorities (three or 25%).

The survey findings suggests that SMS funding has been important in supporting the development of new collaborations. Five (or 42%) lead organisation survey respondents stated that SMS had supported a new collaboration to deliver their funded project, whilst a further four stated that the support had helped them develop a new collaboration which was in addition to supporting existing ones. Two (or 16%) thought it had supported an existing collaboration and one (or 8%) did not know.

The survey findings suggest that working collaboratively in partnership has brought about many benefits for projects. As shown at Figure 6.1, two-thirds or more of survey respondents stated that collaborative working has led to positive impacts such as increased innovation and the transfer of knowledge, more effective delivery at landscape scale, and better engagement with local community.

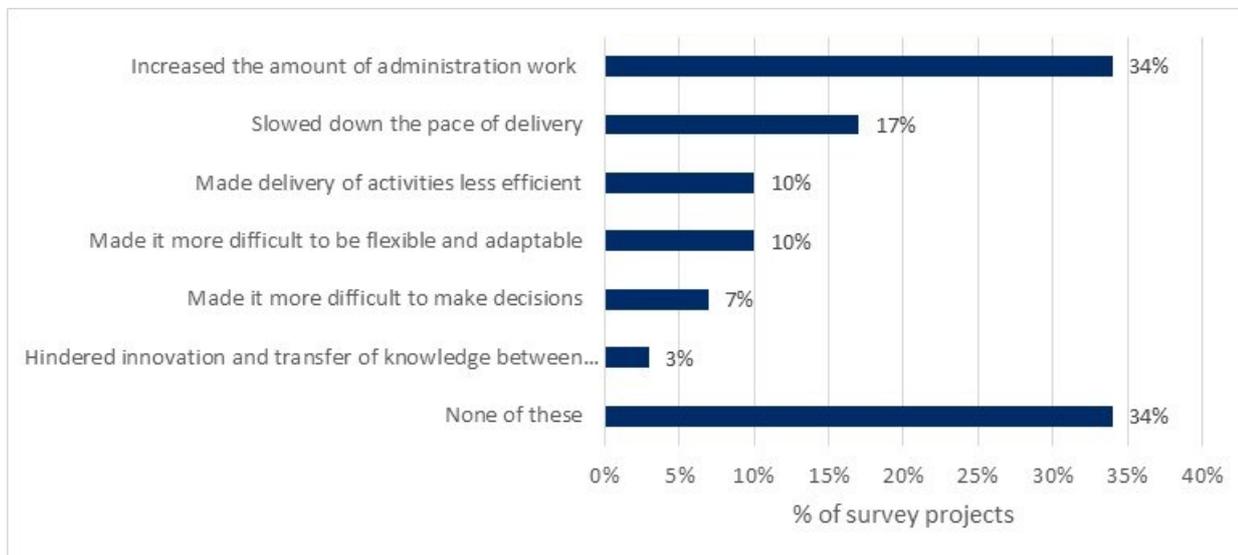
Figure 6.1: Positive impacts of collaborative working



Source: OB3 online survey of funded projects (n=29)

Overall, fewer survey respondents thought that collaboration had resulted in negative impacts and a third (34% or 10 of 29) did not think that there had been any such negative impacts, as shown at Figure 6.2. The most cited negative impact was increased administration work, followed by a slower pace of delivery, although the number of respondents noting these were low.

Figure 6.2: Negative impacts of collaborative working



Source: OB3 online survey of funded projects (n=29)

All but one survey respondents thought it would be either very (69% or 20 of 29) or moderately (28% or 8 of 29) likely that project partners would continue to collaborate in the future post SMS funding. The remaining one respondent was unsure.

Of the 21 interviewed projects during this stage of the evaluation, over half (12) described how collaboration between partners had improved during delivery of the SMS project. Five felt that it had dwindled over that time, and a further five did not think that there had been a major change in the nature or extent of collaboration. Seven of the ten that reported improvements to collaboration were led by small trusts or community groups or association, with the others led by local authorities (2) or a charity. There are no other obvious patterns emerging – improved collaboration was observed across different types of projects and funding windows, and there were examples of strengthened relationships in long-established partnerships and newer partnerships alike.

“Bringing organisations together that are working on one landscape, and promoting good practice, encouraging learning and support works to the benefit of the environment.”

“Building up working relationships over a period of time with people who have the same value base, similar understanding and working practices is essential for success.”

Those who had seen their partnerships broaden or develop over time provided several examples and reasons for this including:

- strong and regular communication developed between project partners and utilising steering groups to harness the views and expertise of those involved (3)
- utilising a facilitation process that allows all partners to be heard, to identify what they want to do and to contribute equally to the development of ideas (3)
- consistency in the membership of the partnership and a realisation over time that they can achieve more by coming together for the benefit of all (3)
- a clear and mutual understanding from the outset as to the roles and responsibilities of all partners and commitment from all involved (3)
- a continued focus by the project to engage with potential partners, communities of interest and community members as the project developed (2) – for example by developing a website providing detailed information on the activity of the project and promoting opportunities to engage

Four of the five who felt that collaboration had dwindled during the delivery of SMS projects were modestly funded projects delivered by trusts. Reasons given for a decrease in interest and investment of time from partnership members over time included:

- changes to individual staff or personnel or organisations facing internal capacity issues (4) – for example at community council, LA or NRW level
- a reduction in concern about the future or no longer a need for the partner(s) in question (2) - for example the SMS funding had resolved the issue that brought them together or partner's involvement was on a specific issue
- a lack of interest as partners (particularly landowners and farmers) become 'fed up with delays', despite being enthused initially (2)

One end of project evaluation report provided a detailed example of a partnership that had not worked particularly well. The lack of a written agreement with each landowner at the outset had led to confusion as to what had been promised and what was delivered. The report questions whether the perceived requirement for SMS projects to involve farmers in all partnerships was appropriate and concludes that 'the strong impression is that they do so in an artificial way to tick a box. Better surely is to be results-focussed.' The same evaluation report also describes NRW's involvement in the project as 'disappointingly incoherent' especially given that most of the priorities the project was helping to address fell under NRW's remit. However, a different picture emerged during our fieldwork interviews, with the project lead explaining how the relationship between them and NRW has continued to be developed and fostered and that the SMS funded project is now resulting in some policy leverage, and NRW taking the learning into account as they develop their forestry policy.

Of the projects who reported no major change during interviews, most felt that their partnerships were already working well prior to obtaining SMS funding and had continued to do so.

In terms of the benefits that had been realised as a result of working collaboratively, eight projects mentioned the knowledge transfer that was being achieved from having partners working together.

- For example, one project had developed its proposed actions based on sound research from the outset, and had broadened its links with university projects, and shared the learning with local community groups and the local school. They also had a knowledge transfer hub on their community website.
- A Wales-wide project had partners working in clearly defined geographical areas, but the regular communication and opportunities to share good practice was described as having pooled expertise, raised standards and provided a degree of accountability for the work being undertaken.
- Working with experts from several trusted public organisations such as NRW, the National Trust and FAWG Cymru had allowed one community group led project to access valuable knowledge, technical advice and monitoring and evaluation expertise. The wider community appreciated the skills and expertise being brought into the process and had benefited from this learning, strengthening their capacity to succeed in future.
- An unexpected result for one project was a new collaboration with Ramblers Cymru which had gone from strength to strength and might possibly lead to a new funded project. They had also now developed a much better relationship with the NRW, and a memorandum of understanding which had been negotiated as a direct result of the project had also been renewed. Project members were now influencing both the Area Statement and wider forestry policy across NRW's work.

End of project evaluation reports provided some reflective evidence from completed projects about what had worked well, and what could have been improved in their collaborative approach. A key learning (3) was that formalised delivery or working plans that setting out the responsibilities of each delivery partner organisation from the outset in a clear manner, and regular reviewing these, was helpful in ensuring continued involvement and delivery of actions.

Some suggestions were also made via open-ended answers to the survey as to the key ingredients to strong collaborative working approaches. Five projects mentioned the importance of the project officer or project manager role in planning, managing, and facilitating the partnership so that momentum could be maintained. The role of the project officer was described as 'important in the following through with decisions and actions and being tenacious and terrier-like in implementation'. Creating opportunities for the younger generation to be part of any collaboration was also seen as important in ensuring continuity for the future.

Finally, three responses to the survey referred to the importance of knowledge transfer within collaborative approaches either through more formal approaches such as peer group training and workshops to encourage skills transfer or at a more informal level, with the exchange of experiences and expertise within a group providing on-going continual professional development.

6.2. Value of collaborative approaches to achieving SMNR objectives

In-depth visits and interviews with a wider range of individuals were held with eleven SMS funded projects at this final stage of the evaluation, with the intention of identifying evidence of activities and outcomes that aligned with the nine SMNR principles.

In undertaking the visits and in analysing any additional documentary evidence available such as progress reports or end-of-project reports, researchers were tasked with reporting against at least three to four SMNR principles where there was sufficient evidence to do so. There was no expectation that every project would be aligned to each of the SMNR principles to the same degree.

The detailed conclusions per project are outlined in Annex A but the exercise identified evidence of project practice that contributed towards the nine SMNR principles. There was strong evidence across most projects of scale; collaboration and engagement; multiple benefits; building resilience and long-term thinking, which suggests that these elements were engrained in the core of SMS funded projects.

Good evidence was also identified across the remaining principles: adaptive management; public participation; evidence; and preventative action. This exercise strongly suggests therefore that the design and intention of the SMS scheme as a whole in funding projects that contributed to, and aligned with SMNR principles, was realised.

6.3. Benefits of working at a landscape scale

Just under a third of SMS projects (30% or 15) were led by public sector organisations, including NGOs and local authorities, whilst nearly half (48% or 24) were led by third or private sector organisations. The remaining fifth (22% or 11) were led by community-based groups, predominantly farmer-led groups. The nature of landscape collaboration across these wide range of approaches varied in that public, third and private sector led projects often co-ordinated activities across farms and other land, whereas those led by community-based groups reflected a more bottom-up collaborative model by farmers themselves.

Regardless of the model adopted, interviewed projects commonly reported that working at a landscape scale had allowed them to address key challenges within the local landscape and achieve a greater impact than by working individually on a farm-by-farm basis. Interviewed projects which were either led by, or involved, farmers and landowners frequently reported that collaborative working between these partners had enabled them to influence and change land management practices at a landscape scale, which in turn would bring about greater benefits to local nature and ecosystems. Two NGO-led collaborations highlighted how they were working with local farmers and landowners in new areas and valued the improved relationships that were being established.

The number of farmers who have been involved in SMS projects have varied, with one project having engaged with 386 farmers across a landscape of over 24,000ha for instance. Examples of the benefits of working collaboratively at a landscape scale captured over the course of our final evaluation fieldwork included:

- seven SMS projects reported that farmers have collaborated at a landscape scale to plant and restore habitat features, such as trees, hedgerows, ponds, and small woodland areas which in turn have improved connectivity across large areas to support habitats and biodiversity at a greater scale than would otherwise have taken place. In one case, farmers with responsibility for 2,000 acres of farmland have been involved in the project to install and restore such habitat features and in another, the project has been able to deal with issues around shared hedges between farms where neither farmer was maintaining them. In another project, 30 farming partners have implemented tree and hedge planting, restored habitats, and created ponds. Another two projects reported that restoring the hedgerow network across the landscape of farmland had improved connectivity for wildlife by linking up different habitats
- in four cases, working collaboratively across river catchment areas has resulted in greater benefits. In one of these cases, 40 farming partners have collaborated to introduce a 'slo-flo' scheme across forestry and agricultural land, whereby woody debris, culverts, and leaky dams have been introduced to turn water away from watercourses onto land. In a second project, collective action by 85 farmers has been taken to reduce pollution run-off into streams and rivers. In another, collaboration between 12 local farmers across a 15-mile section of a river upper catchment area has resulted in increased understanding about the impact of actions taken on one farm upon another, created a sense of collective responsibility and has provided an

opportunity for collective solutions. In another case, it was argued it would have been impossible not to have worked at a landscape level to address water drainage issues, given the interconnectedness of the drainage system in the area

- in another case, it was argued that working at a landscape level has ensured that funding resources have been prioritised to those areas of greatest need, where changes and improvements made could provide the greatest impact on water quality
- one project argued that collaboration between farmers and landowners has been a conduit for engaging a broader range of partners within the project, who would possibly not engage with individual farm owners. These included partners such as public bodies, community groups, third sector organisations and local schools. This project believed that working collaboratively at a landscape level (in this case 3000 hectares of land) had enabled them to bring in other key partners, such as the local authority, police and fire services, neighbourhood watch groups and equine groups, who would not otherwise have engaged with individual farm owners to address local challenges such as fly-tipping and anti-social behaviour. In this case, project partners believed that operating at a landscape level has had a far greater impact on off roading issues as they have been able to exclude vehicles from a far larger area than would otherwise have been the case

6.4. Sustainability of collaborative projects

Of the 12 lead organisation survey respondents, seven (or 58%) had already secured other sources of funding to continue with their project post SMS funding. Of these seven, four had secured Welsh Government funding and five had secured other non-government sources of funding ^[footnote 26]. Three (or 25%) were awaiting the outcome of a funding bid and the remaining two (or 17%) had not yet applied for any funding but would do so in the future. A wide range of funding sources had been applied for and/or secured including from:

- the Welsh Government's ENRaW scheme
- the Welsh Government's Natural Flood Management (NFM) Fund
- the Welsh Government's Co-operation and Supply Chain Development Scheme (CSCDS)
- the National Lottery Heritage Fund (including the Nature Networks Fund)
- the National Lottery Community Fund
- Natural Resources Wales, including the Nature Networks Fund
- Arts Council Wales
- Local Trust Funds
- Landfill Tax Funding
- EU funding
- private sources, including landowner funds and renewable energy trust funding

Footnotes

[26] In two cases they had secured both

Of the 21 projects interviewed during this stage of the evaluation, more than half (12) said their collaborations were likely to continue. Of these, five had some plans already in place (it must be remembered that these are mainly 'live' projects funded from the latter windows):

- Three of those who had plans in place referred to bids submitted to the National Lottery Heritage Fund's Nature Networks fund ^[footnote 27], with some optimism that if successful, three additional years of funding would be obtained.
- One project led by a local authority was looking for funding through the Shared Prosperity Fund ^[footnote 28] as the likely way forward to appointing a landscape officer for two years, with the expectation that the role would be mainstreamed thereafter (subject to funding).
- Another project had gained funding locally including from a local windfarm community fund to part-fund a sustainable travel hub and from the local quarry to maintain landscape improvements. They were continuing to look at other funding opportunities so that they could further develop their collaborative landscape approach.

Of the other interviewed projects that stated they were likely to continue but did not currently have plans in place to sustain the collaboration, eight mentioned the collaborative element of the new sustainable land management scheme in Wales from 2025 (i.e., the SFS) as a potential source of income in future, and two referred to an 'SMS #2' that might be available in the meantime.

Nine projects were less clear as to whether their collaborative approach would continue in future. Two projects led by local authorities or wildlife charities felt that they were unlikely to continue – suggesting that their approach had been project focused. Others suggested that they would not continue without further funding support from somewhere, often due to maintenance of existing work having been factored into contracts or that local farmers and landowners were expected to maintain the improvements made (e.g., hedgerows) or that quality materials had been used negating the need for any real maintenance for at least ten years. Two collaborations stated that they would not continue as their experience via SMS had 'put them off'.

Six projects raised the issue of continuation or maintenance funding – describing how their need for funding in future would be on a much smaller scale than SMS, but that a small amount of funding (perhaps the equivalent of 20% of current levels) to maintain some activities or improvements made to the landscape.

Footnotes

[27] [Nature Networks Fund \(The National Lottery Heritage Fund\)](#)

[28] [UK Shared Prosperity Fund: Prospectus \(UK Government\)](#)

End-of project reports provide very little evidence that they have a robust approach to maintaining the legacy of their SMS funding. They raise the need for longer-term funding to ensure improvements can be maintained and point to the issues being long term in nature. Success in ensuring sustainability is therefore mixed:

- One successful example is a project which has established long-term management plans with private and public sector landowners to maintain the new habitats that have been established. Some of the contracts to manage the sites are worth around £20k, and the local council has also funded a contract for circa £5k for wildflower roundabouts. At the time of writing the end of project report, it is said that this project 'is on its way to be self-sustaining'.
- A Wales-wide project funded by the SMS resulted in better coordination of research efforts and built research capacity to ensure that the sustainable management of Welsh peatlands is underpinned by a robust evidence base. Work undertaken initially by the project was handed over to the new National Peatland Action Programme (NPAP) under NRW which can 'lead on from the legacy of the SMS project with £1.1m of peatland funding and over £500k to national parks.' Funding was secured for future research with the successful application for a Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) Landscape Decision Fellowship to support the development of peatland policy, strategy, and practice in Wales. On a more practical level too, funding from SMS had been used by the project to purchase a new Licor portable GHG (methane, CO₂, and H₂O) analyser, which means that it can continue to be used all over Wales for rapid surveys and the long-term monitoring of key sites.
- In one project, as the issues being addressed are of direct relevance to public sector organisations and NGOs the end of project report states that there should be an expectation that those organisations make a proactive effort to integrate the project into their monitoring processes. It goes on to state that this should be an integral element of Welsh Government's assessment in funding SMS-type investments.
- Tackling Invasive non-native species (INNS) in a co-ordinated catchment wide basis through project funding raises concerns about sustainability in another end of project report. Whilst good outputs were delivered during the project funding period, and efforts to train local groups and volunteers to be equipped and trained to enable longer-term maintenance, the end of project report raises maintenance risks after the end of project funding.

- One project was successful in obtaining external funding to complement SMS project activity through the local council and via a Tesco/World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) partnership through the Courtauld Commitment ^[footnote 29]. The project researched and tested new markets for ecosystem services and established important relationships for future cooperation. PES opportunities with egg buyers and packers involving free range poultry within the project catchment were developed, but it is reported that momentum will be dependent on the retention of project officers.
- Without funding for a Commons ranger post, one project believes that the work undertaken under SMS funding will struggle to be maintained as ‘the volunteer group will slowly fade away...fly tipping will once again blight the landscape, costing much more than the rangers salary to police and remove the illegal dumps’.

Footnotes

[29] The Courthauld Commitment 2030 is a voluntary agreement that enables collaborative action across the entire UK food chain to deliver farm-to-fork reductions in food waste, greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions and water stress that will help the UK food and drink sector achieve global environmental goals: [History of the Courtauld Commitment \(Waste and Resources Action Programme\)](#)

7. Key findings: outputs, outcomes, and difference made

This chapter considers SMS achievements and project performance against programme Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). It also considers the environmental, social, and economic outcomes achieved by projects and the extent to which these are likely to be sustained post funding. The chapter draws upon monitoring information provided by the Welsh Government, feedback from survey respondents, interviews conducted with a sample of 21 SMS funded projects and any relevant evidence available within nine project level evaluation reports.

7.1. Spend and public expenditure

50 projects have been funded by the SMS (see Annex A) with a total £23, 657,976 of RDP monies committed to projects. As of December 2022, the SMS had spent £13,484,881 of its total committed, representing 57% of the funding available.

Table 7.1 below shows how the average duration of SMS project delivery has decreased over time.

Table 7.1 Average duration of and grant awarded to SMS funded projects per funding window

Funding Window	Number of projects	Average Total Eligible Project Costs	Average Total Eligible Grant	Average duration of project [footnote 30]
1	11	£564,561	£563,198	3 years 11 months
2	13	£518,514	£501,169	3 years 6 months
3	9	£473,035	£460,000	2 years 10 months
4	9	£520,054	£520,054	2 years 3 months
5	8	£425,028 ^[footnote 31]	£417,885 ^[footnote 32]	1 year 11 months
Total	50	£498,677	£490,528	3 years

Source: Welsh Government

The table shows a decrease in the average total grant awarded particularly in Windows 3 and 5 but the average grant total remains similar across other funding windows. However, there is a clear decrease in the length of time available for projects to delivery their outputs and outcomes from almost four years for those funded during Window 1 to under two years on average in Window 5. SMS guidance stipulated that projects would have at least two years to deliver, but in four cases across Windows 4 and 5, projects have had less than 24 months to deliver, which is attributed to delays caused by the Covid pandemic and administrative processes in signing off projects to start full delivery. In comparison, three of the projects funded during the early stages of the scheme (Windows 1 and 2) have been funded for almost five years, and two have been funded in excess of five years.

Many of these earlier projects have been through re-evaluation processes that have seen their project durations extended as a result. However, we have not been able to access data from RPW Online as to the number of re-evaluations requested or agreed, nor do we have information as to the amount of time it has taken for re-evaluations to be assessed.

Footnotes

[30] from approval date to financial completion date

[31] This does not include one funded project for £70,000 which extended the work of an EOI Window 1 project.

[32] Ibid.

7.2. KPI performance

All survey respondents from project lead organisations (n=12) reported that they had achieved (or expected to achieve) either all or almost all their KPIs. Interviewed projects conveyed a slightly more mixed picture about the extent to which they had (or were delivering) against their KPIs. Of the 21 interviewed projects, over half (12) thought that they had either exceeded or met all or most of their KPIs or were on track to do so. The remaining projects reported a more mixed picture and several ongoing projects believed that they would achieve some but not all their targets. Some ongoing projects also suggested that they were focusing on trying to make up for lost time over the remaining few months of delivery.

Factors which were thought to account for strong performance against KPIs included:

- targets set not being particularly ambitious
- strong partnership working
- dedicated team and strong co-ordination

Factors which were thought to account for any project level under-performance against KPIs included:

- targets being overly ambitious, particularly within the timescales set
- reliance on partner organisations who had been stretched in terms of capacity to deliver their elements of a project (and a lesson learnt from this in terms of needing to fund these activities)
- project activities needing to be undertaken sequentially as a condition of funding i.e., feasibility study reports prepared prior to physical works being undertaken
- difficulties sourcing contractors
- cashflow issues
- the COVID-19 pandemic (which impacted on engagement, volunteering, and training KPIs in particular)

7.3. Overall SMS output achievements

Overall, the 50 SMS projects set out to achieve a total of 24 RDP case level indicators, although two of these indicators did not have any numerical targets ^[footnote 33]. These are set out at Tables 7.2 to 7.5 and have been grouped into environmental, social, economic, and other outputs. Projects have also reported other outputs achieved, but these have not been aggregated at the scheme level. These include outputs such as number of volunteers recruited, improvements made to paths, improvement or creation of flower meadows, length of hedging planted or maintained, and number of trees planted.

An analysis of scheme performance as of December 2022 shows that the SMS has already exceeded or achieved 10 of its 24 case level indicators ^[footnote 34] and is very close to achieving a further five (having achieved at least 90% of the target in each case). It has made some to reasonable progress against a further five indicators but has yet to report any achievements against the remaining four indicators.

Table 7.2 SMS environmental targets and achievements

Environmental outputs	Target	Achieved	Achieved to date as % of target
Area (ha) of peatland habitat re-wetted	160	100	63%
Area (ha) of upland restored to improve carbon retaining condition	46	46	100%
Area (ha) of woodland supported	4,374	2,277	52%
Initiatives developing the natural and/or historic environment	0	1	n/a
Number of activities undertaken / supported to develop or establish Payments for Environmental Services (PES)	0	1	n/a
Number of feasibility studies	51	52	102%

Source: Welsh Government

Footnotes

[33] These two were (i) Initiatives developing the natural and/or historic environment and (ii) Number of activities undertaken / supported to develop or establish PES.

[34] Accepting that two of these had no targets in place.

Table 7.3 SMS social targets and achievements

Social outputs	Target	Achieved	Achieved to date as % of target
Managed access to countryside or coast (km)	1,145	1,089	95%
Number of actions to utilise natural resources for health benefit	919	1,275	139%
Number of individuals gaining a qualification	108	76	70%
Number of participants in training	1,528	1,480	97%
Number of training days	678	663	98%
Population benefiting from improved services / infrastructure	1,500	Not reported	Not reported
Total public expenditure for training / skills	£182,408	Not reported	Not reported

Source: Welsh Government

Table 7.4 SMS economic targets and achievements

Economic outputs	Target	Achieved	Achieved to date as % of target
Enterprises assisted	292	320	110%
Enterprises financially supported	15	0	0%
Number of enterprises receiving specialist advice that begin a new product, process, or service innovation	12	12	100%
Number of jobs created	34	41	132%
Number of jobs safeguarded	24	22	92%
Number of micro small and medium sized enterprises supported	392	523	133%
Number of new markets accessed	1	3	300%

Source: Welsh Government

Table 7.5 SMS other targets and achievements

Other outputs	Target	Achieved	Achieved to date as % of target
Number of networks established	65	63	97%
Number of pilot activities undertaken / supported	180	45	25%
Number of stakeholders engaged	8,546	6,144	72%
Stakeholder engagement good practice activity	5	Not reported	Not reported

Source: Welsh Government

7.4. Completed project achievements

As of December 2022, a total of 19 SMS projects were complete. An analysis of achievements for these completed projects against their funded targets shows that they achieved or exceeded 19 of 24 case level indicators. No outputs were reported by these completed projects for two indicators, namely total public expenditure for training or skills and stakeholder engagement good practice activity and no targets were set, or outputs achieved for the three indicators of population benefiting from improved services/infrastructure, enterprises financially supported or enterprises receiving specialist advice that begin a new product, process, or service innovation.

Table 7.6 Completed projects environmental targets and achievements

Environmental outputs	Target	Achieved	Achieved to date as % of target
Area (ha) of peatland habitat re-wetted	26	31	119%
Area (ha) of upland restored to improve carbon retaining condition	46	46	100%
Area (ha) of woodland supported	173	234	135%
Initiatives developing the natural and/or historic environment	0	1	n/a
Number of activities undertaken / supported to develop or establish PES	0	1	n/a
Number of feasibility studies	26	45	173%

Source: Welsh Government

Table 7.7 Completed projects social targets and achievements

Social outputs	Target	Achieved	Achieved to date as % of target
Managed access to countryside or coast (km)	72	77	107%
Number of actions to utilise natural resources for health benefit	475	997	210%
Number of individuals gaining a qualification	51	61	120%
Number of participants in training	403	928	230%
Number of training days	521	555	107%
Population benefiting from improved services / infrastructure	0	0	n/a
Total public expenditure for training / skills	£159,908	0	0%

Source: Welsh Government

Table 7.8 Completed projects economic targets and achievements

Economic outputs	Target	Achieved	Achieved to date as % of target
Enterprises assisted	90	202	224%
Enterprises financially supported	0	0	n/a
Number of enterprises receiving specialist advice that begin a new product, process, or service innovation	0	0	n/a
Number of jobs created	15	23	153%
Number of jobs safeguarded	14	16	114%
Number of micro small and medium sized enterprises supported	267	493	185%
Number of new markets accessed	0	2	n/a

Source: Welsh Government

Table 7.9 Completed projects - other targets and achievements

Other outputs	Target	Achieved	Achieved to date as % of target
Number of networks established	32	50	156%
Number of pilot activities undertaken / supported	26	31	120%
Number of stakeholders engaged	2328	3554	153%
Stakeholder engagement good practice activity	5	0	0%

Source: Welsh Government

7.5. Extent to which project monitoring and final evaluation captures achievements and impact

Most interviewed projects mentioned that they had, were working with, or planned to appoint an external evaluator to capture final achievements and the impact of the project. One interviewed project had been unable to appoint an evaluator due to potential contractors being busy.

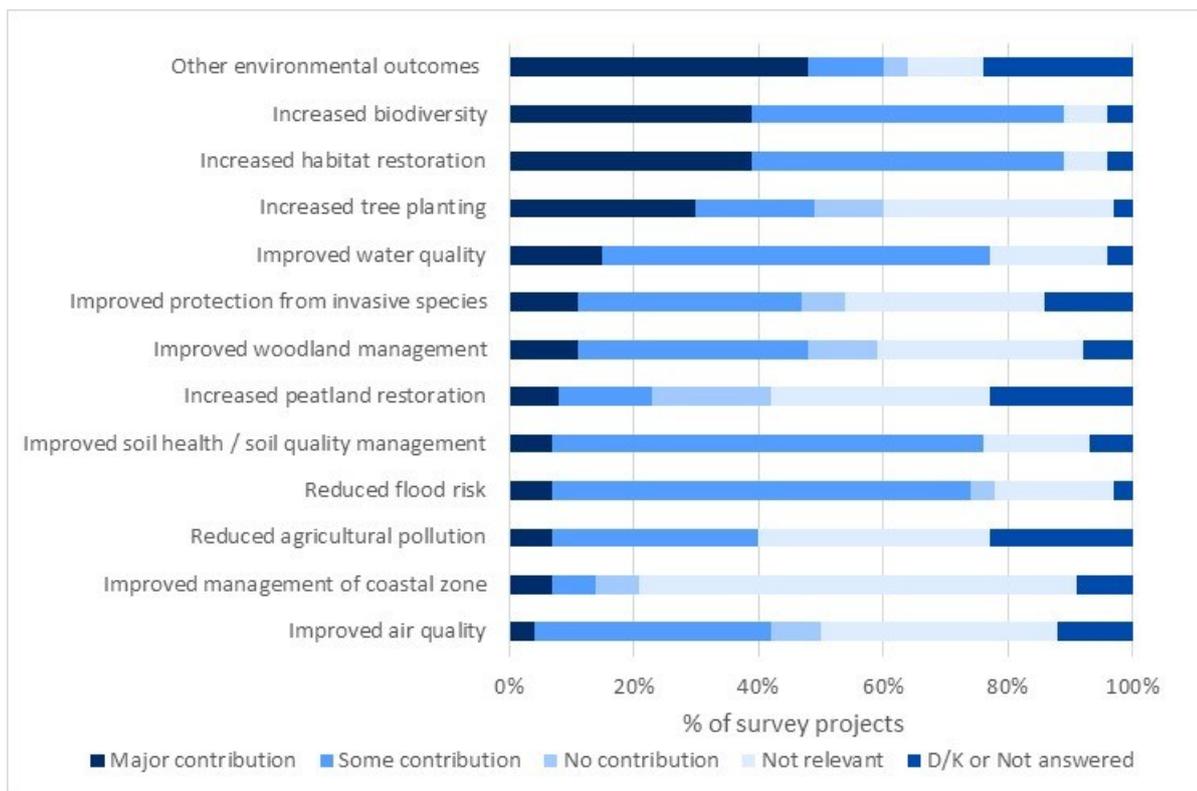
In terms of good practice in relation to monitoring activities, projects provide regular reports to steering groups, prepare minutes of steering group meetings, and review the effectiveness of training sessions provided. Several projects also reported that they undertook baseline surveys at the outset and repeated this towards the project end. Projects also recognised the importance of repeating these baseline surveys at a future point, to better assess the longer-term impact of their interventions. Photographic evidence plays an important role in evidencing project achievements. Three interviewed projects mentioned that they adopt geo-tagged photography and use this to map the data on a cloud platform whilst a fourth intend to map their activities using a GIS map.

One issue raised by interviewed projects related to inconsistencies when interpreting case level indicators. For instance, one project questioned whether they should be reporting the improvement made to a section of a path or the overall longer section of the path which had become more accessible as a result and, despite Welsh Government's advice to adopt the latter in this particular case, projects would have welcomed greater written guidance on this within the scheme. Aligned to this, projects also noted that they would have welcomed a scheme outcomes framework from the outset, to support their monitoring and reporting activities.

7.6. Environmental benefits

Figure 7.1 sets out the contribution that survey respondents thought that their project had made to various environmental outcomes, ranked according to the extent projects had made a major contribution. It shows that projects thought they made a major contribution to increasing biodiversity and habitat restoration. Overall, projects made the least contribution to the management of coastal zones, peatland restoration and reducing agricultural pollution. Other environmental outcomes achieved included reduced fly-tipping and anti-social behaviour, improved grassland management, and improved knowledge and awareness of environmental and ecological issues amongst the local community.

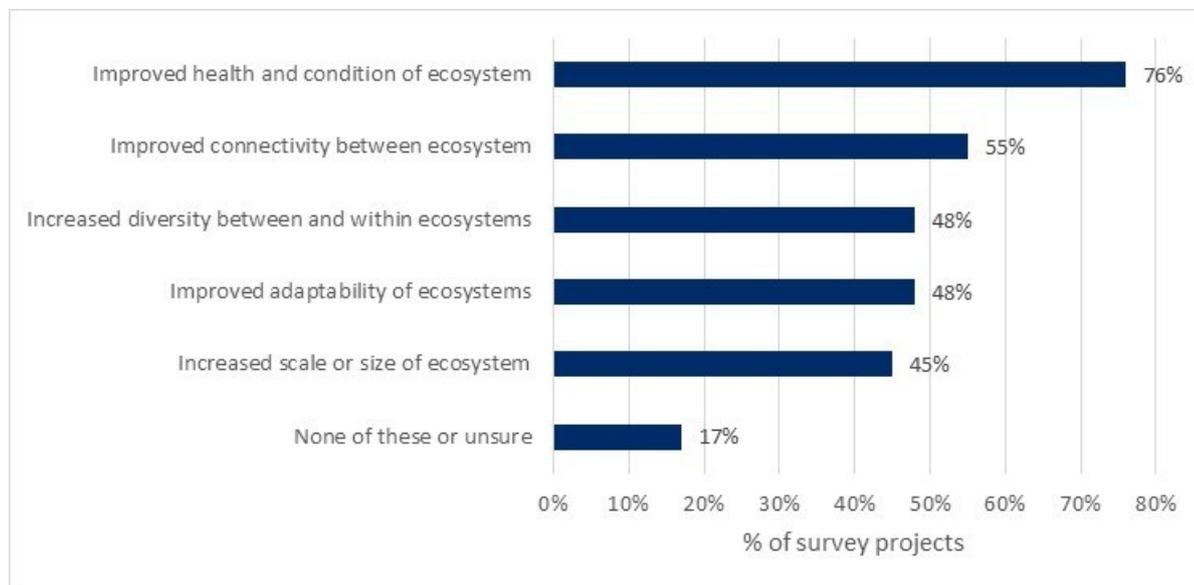
Figure 7.1: Environmental outcomes achieved by SMS projects



Source: OB3 online survey of funded projects (n=29). This was a closed-response question and respondents were asked what contribution their project had made to each of these options.

Survey respondents were also asked in what way their SMS project had created a more resilient ecosystem. Some three-quarters of survey respondents thought that their project had improved the health and condition of ecosystems, as shown at Figure 7.2, whilst around half of those surveyed reported other contributions.

Figure 7.2: Contribution made by SMS projects to creating more resilient ecosystems



Source: OB3 online survey of funded projects (n=29). This was a closed-response question and respondents could select more than one option.

Many examples of the environmental outcomes achieved by SMS projects were put forward by those interviewed during our fieldwork, and within end of project evaluation reports. Each one of the outcomes set out at Figure 7.1 are considered in turn:

- increased biodiversity: nearly all the 21 interviewed projects thought that they had taken action which would result in increased biodiversity. In one case, the provision of new trails was thought to have reduced the impact of visitors on more sensitive areas, such as within woodlands whilst improved public paths at another project was thought to have resulted in reduced trampling on grounds and the creation of safer environments for ground nesting birds. Adopting predation controls were also considered effective measures which would lead to increased biodiversity. For instance, in the case of one project, predation controls were expected to have a positive impact on the number of curlews able to successfully fledge their young. Similarly, another project has adopted predation controls to make the environment more attractive to ground nesting birds. Other projects reported that they had identified new species through their baseline studies, which could be better preserved and managed by landowners and farmers via management plans. One such project reported that golden plovers and yellow hammers had been spotted in the area through baseline research. In other cases, providing supplementary feeding for some birds over the winter period had ensured that they were in a better condition at breeding seasons, thereby increasing their chances of survival

- increased habitat restoration: nearly all of the 21 interviewed projects had also taken action which they thought would result in restoring habitats. Some of these actions are discussed below under their respective environmental outcome (e.g., tree and hedge planting). In addition, some three projects who were interviewed had taken action to remove and control bracken on common land. This was thought to create better habitats which would encourage biodiversity at a local level. In one case, the creation of a series of fire breaks within the bracken would also result in reduced fire risks on common land. Two projects who were interviewed had created wetland habitats as part of their interventions. Another project reported to have installed and improved ponds as well as introduced more deciduous shelter belts in an effort to create better habitat conditions
- increased tree planting: most projects who were interviewed reported that they had planted trees, and/or planted or restored hedges. These actions were considered to have (or would) improve habitat links and create natural wildlife shelters, thereby building a more resilient ecosystem. Many of these projects also reported that these actions would help reduce water run-off which in turn would help to improve soil quality. One project in particular had focused on these types of actions and had restored hedgerows, planted trees, restored ponds, created wildlife shelters, and fenced woodlands to create forest floors. Another had coppiced and planted new hedgerows to create new and better-connected habitats
- improved water quality: a few interviewed projects believed that they had undertaken action which would improve water quality. By way of example, one project had restored a traditional ditch network which, coupled with reducing slurry run off from fields, will improve water quality. The improved nutrient content of river water would in turn make the local ecosystem more resilient and vibrant. Given the area in consideration in this project is an SSSI and is in close proximity to a Special Area for Conservation (SAC), a Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar Site this outcome was thought to have a wider positive benefit. Another project reported that it had taken measures to protect water courses from pollution by fencing and adopting better design of farm animal waste management
- improved protection from invasive species: two interviewed projects reported that they had taken action around invasive non-native species (INNS). One of these projects was working at a pan Wales level to share good practice and resources via a network of local action groups to tackle local INNS issues whilst the other reported to have cleared 200km of riverbank of invasive non-native species (INNS). In this case, there is evidence of reducing dominance of existing Japanese Knotweed sites with annual treatment and monitoring 3 years after no emergence to confirm eradication. A mapping exercise demonstrates that the clearance work upstream had the potential to reduce the risk of flooding downstream

- improved woodland management: three of the SMS projects, led by the same lead organisation, had a specific focus on maintaining woodland areas and set out to adapt land management practices to tackle invasive species and diseases, and to minimise the risk of flooding downstream through natural land-based interventions such as hedge planting and woody debris dams. The three projects also intended to collaborate with landowners and facilitate the sharing of knowledge and good practice. However, these three woodland focused projects did not contribute towards the evaluation and project evaluation reports are not yet available for one of the projects which had been completed (the other two are ongoing). Despite being able to draw upon the evidence of other interviewed projects which contained elements of woodland management work, this evaluation cannot provide comprehensive evidence of how SMS projects have helped to improve woodland management approaches
- increased peatland restoration: four interviewed projects reported to have increased peatland restoration and had done so in a variety of ways. One for instance has managed to restore 661 hectares of peatlands whilst another has managed to control off roading to prevent further damage to the blanket bog, which is an important carbon store. A third project has worked with farmers and landowners to adopt more appropriate grazing methods for retaining carbon. A fourth project has focused on a large catchment area of peatland and in adopting a Peatland Carbon Code commit to maintaining the catchment area in a good condition for 35 years. Another project provided evidence via its end of project evaluation report of how it had increased peatland restoration. This project had re-wetted 66 ha of peatland habitat and surveys showed a positive but modest change in bare soil coverage
- improved soil health / soil quality management: around half of interviewed projects reported that their actions had led to improved soil health and improved soil quality management approaches. In two cases, these outcomes had come about as a result of increased awareness and knowledge amongst landowners and farmers. Two projects provided training to farmers on soil quality and health which have led to changes in their soil management practices. Training sessions have helped land managers to appreciate the importance of soil health, the benefits of regenerative farming, and the fragile nature of local biodiversity. In these cases, farmers adopting practices which retain as much soil carbon as possible not only benefit local biodiversity, but also benefit them financially. In another case, a project had improved soil health conditions on upland farming areas by planting deciduous shelter belts, introducing fencing, and encouraging mixed grazing methods. In another case, the focus has been on reducing the amount of bare, exposed mineral soil and peat by encouraging heather and dwarf shrub cover on bare ground. This approach to peatland management has helped to control erosion problems at specific sites. In other cases, the focus has been on gathering baseline data to obtain an accurate picture of soil health by taking soil samples and testing for multi-nutrients, including phosphate and carbon. In one case, this type of data has been used to engage and educate a large number of stakeholders on the sustainable management of soil for improving water quality

- reduced flood risk: two interviewed projects had managed to reduce the risk of flooding within their catchment area. These had planted new and restored existing hedges in a river catchment area to reduce water flows, as well as construct debris dams to slow river flows. However, in one case, the lack of academic and technical support expected from a partner university and NRW did not materialise, meaning that its impact as a flood risk management exercise was diminished
- reduced agricultural pollution: one project has been monitoring the grazing patterns of cattle and moving them away from over grazed areas in order to improve habitats. Other projects operating at a river catchment level have also undertaken action to improve water quality in rivers by working with farmers across the catchment area to develop and implement whole farm plans. These have resulted in actions such as installation of livestock water provision and improved grazing strategies and techniques. One of these projects also delivered soil structure and health assessments for catchment-based farmers to help identify ways of improving soil quality and carbon sequestration
- improved management of coastal zone: two projects have a specific focus on Wales' coastal path and reported that the action taken would help to develop a more resilient ecosystem in the future. In both cases, better livestock management on coastland will allow for more wildlife grasslands to exist and a reduction in dense bracken and bramble will allow for greater wildlife to thrive. Farmers and landowners have changed the way cattle, sheep and horses graze the land: livestock is removed in April and May to allow grasslands to bloom, and overgrazed areas are fenced off during key flowering periods in the spring. The changes made will allow the ecosystem to thrive by supporting a greater wealth of birds, animals, and insects across the coastline. In one case, the project also introduced a 'payment for outcomes' pilot to incentivise farmers to create connectivity corridors along the Wales coastal path and to develop good practice to manage invasive species
- improved air quality: perhaps not surprisingly given the low number of survey projects who reported that they had positively impacted upon air quality, no specific examples were captured through the interviews or project evaluation reports of how projects had taken action to improve air quality

The project survey found that an important 'other' environmental outcome was improved knowledge and awareness of environmental and ecological issues amongst local communities. This was reinforced by projects who contributed to the fieldwork. Training for farmers and landowners has been an important aspect of provision and will be key to monitoring and maintaining environmental outcomes over time. In addition to the soil health and management training referred to earlier, other examples offered included training for community volunteers. At another project farmers have received guidance on how best to farm for ground nesting birds.

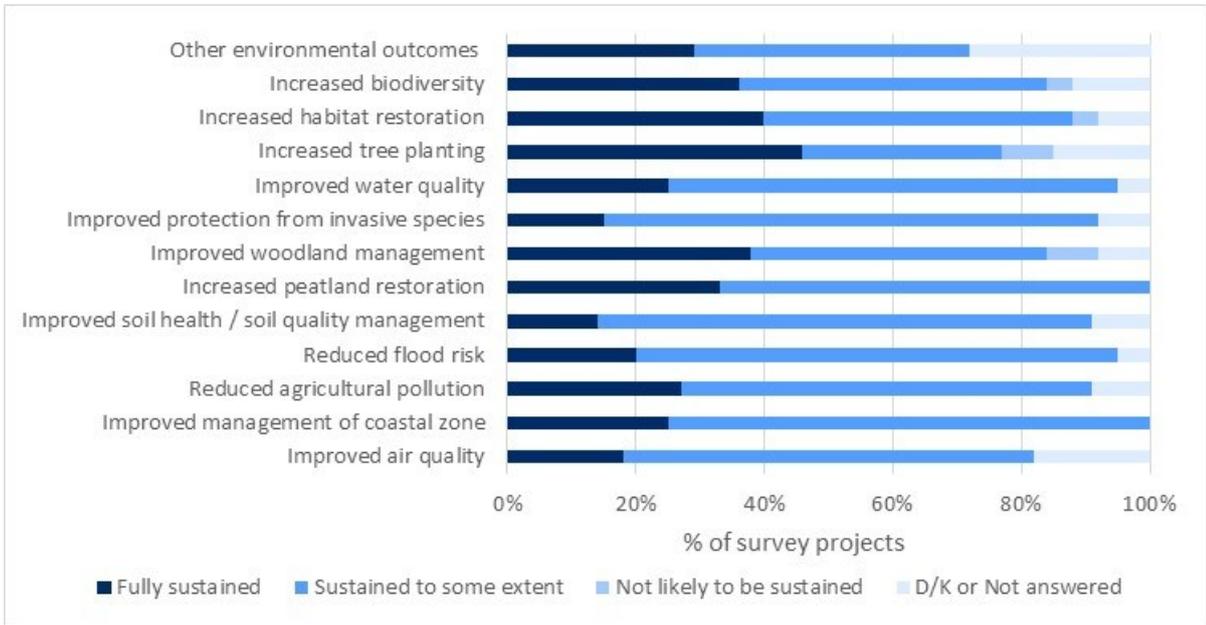
It is clear however that any environmental outcomes achieved need to be monitored over a much longer time period than is funded via SMS in order to demonstrate their achievement and sustainability. One project has come to an arrangement with a local volunteer ecologist to repeat their baseline survey after a five and again after a ten-year period to monitor changes. The project also works with several universities to monitor changes to local ecosystems over time. One research project is looking at how tree canopy is absorbing water and another academic research project will analyse data gathered from sensors placed within the woody dams created by the project to better understand the early warning about floods.

However, similar arrangements are not commonly put in place across other funded projects e.g., in one case, whilst a detailed baseline survey was conducted at the outset it wasn't clear how the project intended to monitor the impact of interventions post-funding.

Not all projects had achieved environmental outcomes to date and three projects who were interviewed provided a reason for this. These projects had not delivered any physical works at the time of evaluation fieldwork as they had been focused on undertaking baseline research and engagement work. In one case, much frustration was expressed that funding conditions meant they had to complete their baseline research before any action to benefit wildlife and biodiversity could be undertaken. For a fourth project, it was considered too early to identify any environmental outcomes. The end of project evaluation report for this project notes that as the creation of wetlands had only taken place towards the end of the project lifetime, they were only beginning to vegetate. Despite this, landowners were already reporting seeing new species visiting the sites.

Figure 7.3 sets out the extent to which survey respondents thought that environmental outcomes would be sustained post SMS funding. Overall, the graph suggests that these outcomes will either be fully or partially sustained. Whilst some care needs to be adopted given the low number of responses, the outcomes which are more likely to be fully sustained are those relating to increased tree planting, habitat restoration, woodland management, and biodiversity. Interviews with project representatives reinforced this view, and it was broadly suggested that actions such as planting new hedging, fencing and tree planting will be maintained in the long term (as they require very little human maintenance) but that other changes will be more dependent upon behavioural change amongst landowners, farmers, and community volunteers.

Figure 7.3: Whether environmental outcomes will be sustained post funding

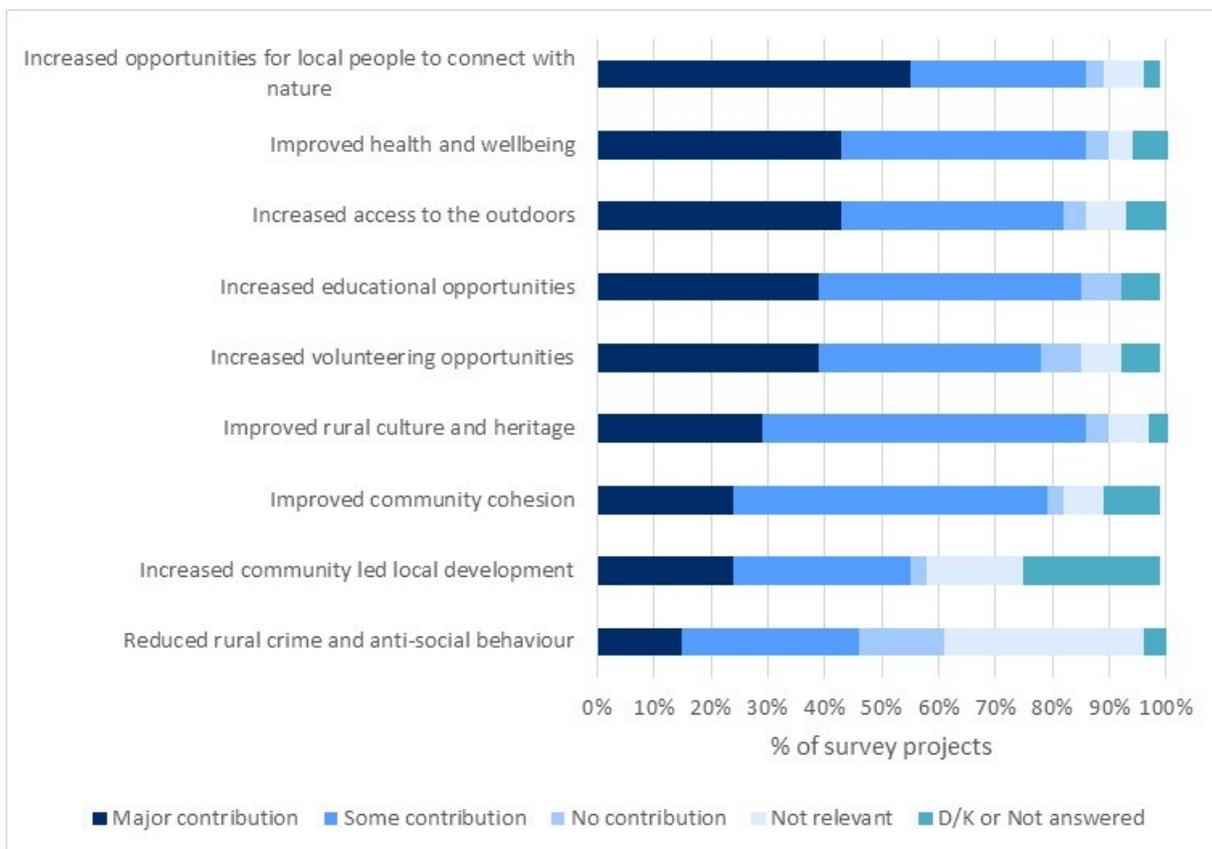


Source: OB3 online survey of funded projects (n=those who stated SMS project would either make a major or some contribution to each outcome. This varied from n=4, in the case of improved management of coastal zone to n=25, in the case of increased habitat restoration and increased biodiversity)

7.7. Social benefits

As shown in Figure 7.4 survey respondents believe a wide range of social benefits have been achieved via their SMS projects. A large majority (86% or 25 of 29 survey respondents) thought that their project had made either some or a major contribution to increasing opportunities for local people to connect with nature and helped to improve health and wellbeing. A similarly high proportion (83% or 24 survey respondents), thought that their project had made either some or a major contribution towards each of the three outcomes of improving health and wellbeing of their local community, increasing educational opportunities and improving rural culture and heritage.

Figure 7.4: Social benefits achieved by SMS projects



Source: OB3 online survey of funded projects (n=29)

Examples of how these social benefits had been achieved were gathered from interviews and project evaluation reports. They included:

- increased opportunities for local people to connect with nature: projects reported that they had put in place new interpretation resources, supported by QR codes, to improve people's understanding of wildlife and biodiversity at local sites. Projects had also held events and talks to improve knowledge about local nature and environmental assets, including celebration days and open days. Others promoted the improvements made to local footpaths as part of their project, for instance by promoting nature walks on their website, to encourage their greater use
- improved health and wellbeing: projects have introduced outdoor based activities such as guided walks in rural areas which resulted in increased confidence amongst local people to use landscapes not previously accessed. In one case, walks have been adapted to individuals' ability and confidence and the project has been collaborating with GPs to pilot social prescribing activities. Projects reported that their activities have helped to overcome issues of isolation and loneliness, often through the availability of volunteering opportunities and community events. For instance, volunteers at one project reported feeling less isolated as a result of their involvement. Similarly in another project, activities helped the farming community to come together after the pandemic to develop a greater sense of solidarity and help address loneliness
- increased access to the outdoors: improvements to paths and walkways have led to improved access to outdoor areas for local people. In one project, new and improved access through Public Rights of Way and permissive paths across previously closed off privately owned areas, now provide better access to nature for residents and employees of businesses in the area. In another project, improvements made to local paths and bridleways were thought to be important in offering greater low-cost exercise options to a relatively poor community
- increased educational opportunities: projects have worked with local schools to raise awareness, interest and knowledge of ecology and nature amongst school pupils. Often this has involved providing educational resource packs to schools whilst in other cases it's involved school visits to local farms and local landscapes. One project has supported 12 primary and secondary schools and raised awareness and understanding amongst 600 young people. Another project has worked with their local school to instal a weather station and a local volunteer is supporting the school to interpret the data gathered. In another case, a project has collaborated with a local college to train students
- increased volunteering opportunities: projects have provided volunteering opportunities to residents, including conservation and environmental volunteering opportunities. In one case, local volunteers are used to monitor environmental changes and collect water samples from across the area to help monitor water quality

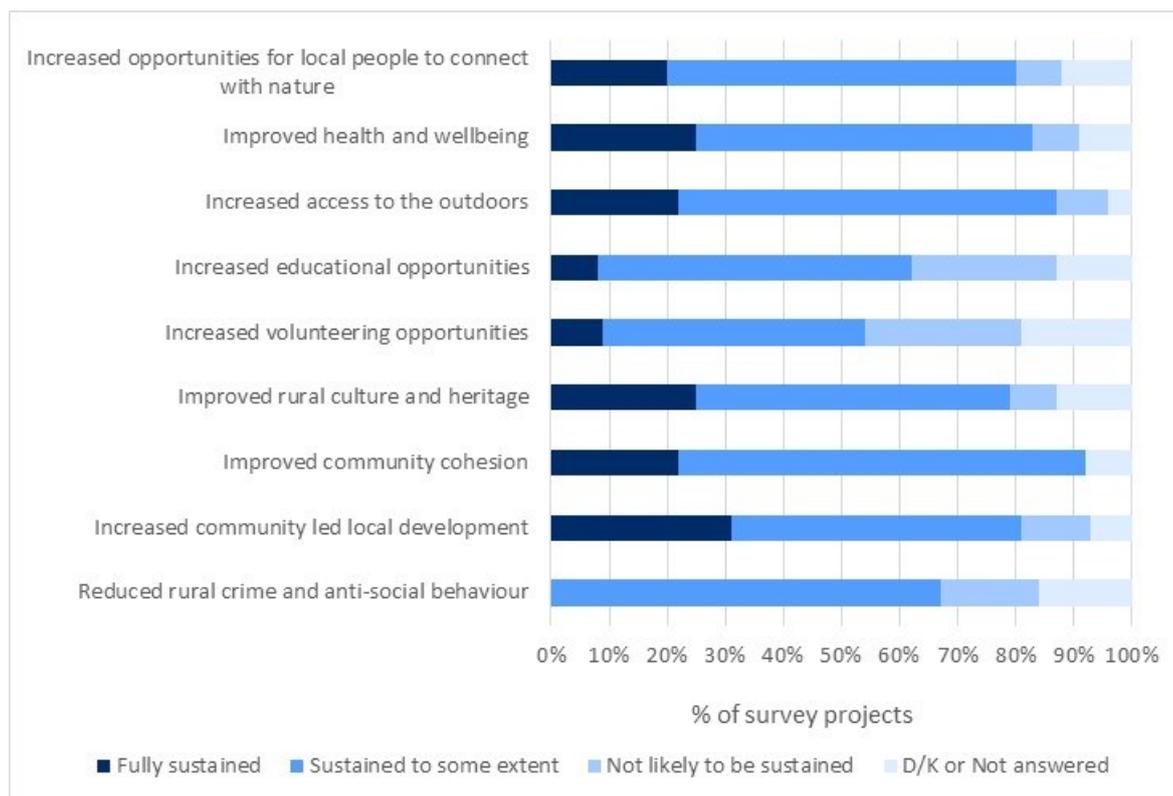
- improved rural culture and heritage: one project reported that they had undertaken work to conserve local historical heritage. Others had worked with local chapels, churches and village halls and in one case the development of a new car park at the village hall has meant it has become more economically viable for the future
- increased community cohesion: one project considered greater community cohesion to be their biggest achievement. In this case the community works together in a much closer manner, possibly aided by the community's response to the pandemic, and it was thought this would help to address some of the challenges facing their rural community such as increased older population, isolation, and lack of affordable housing
- increased community led local development: one project reported an increased sense of 'balchder' ^[footnote 35] and can-do attitude within the community as a result of the project. In this case, the SMS project has had a knock-on effect on other aspects of community life given that the community has come together to purchase a local pub which has recently closed
- reduced crime and anti-social behaviour: one project reported upon their positive impact to reduce fly-tipping on common land and restrict vehicles from accessing the land for illegal off-road use. As a result of these improvements, coupled with improved car parking and waymarked trails, the common land has become a much more pleasant environment and more use it made of it for recreational purposes

Footnotes

[35] Sense of pride

Survey respondents were less confident that the social benefits achieved by SMS projects would be fully sustained post funding, although they were more confident that these benefits would be sustained to some extent, particularly benefits such as increased access to the outdoors and improved health and wellbeing. As shown at Figure 7.5, outcomes such as increased educational and volunteering opportunities appear to be the ones less likely to be sustained post funding, suggesting that these types of activities require ongoing funding to be sustained.

Figure 7.5: Whether social benefits will be sustained post funding

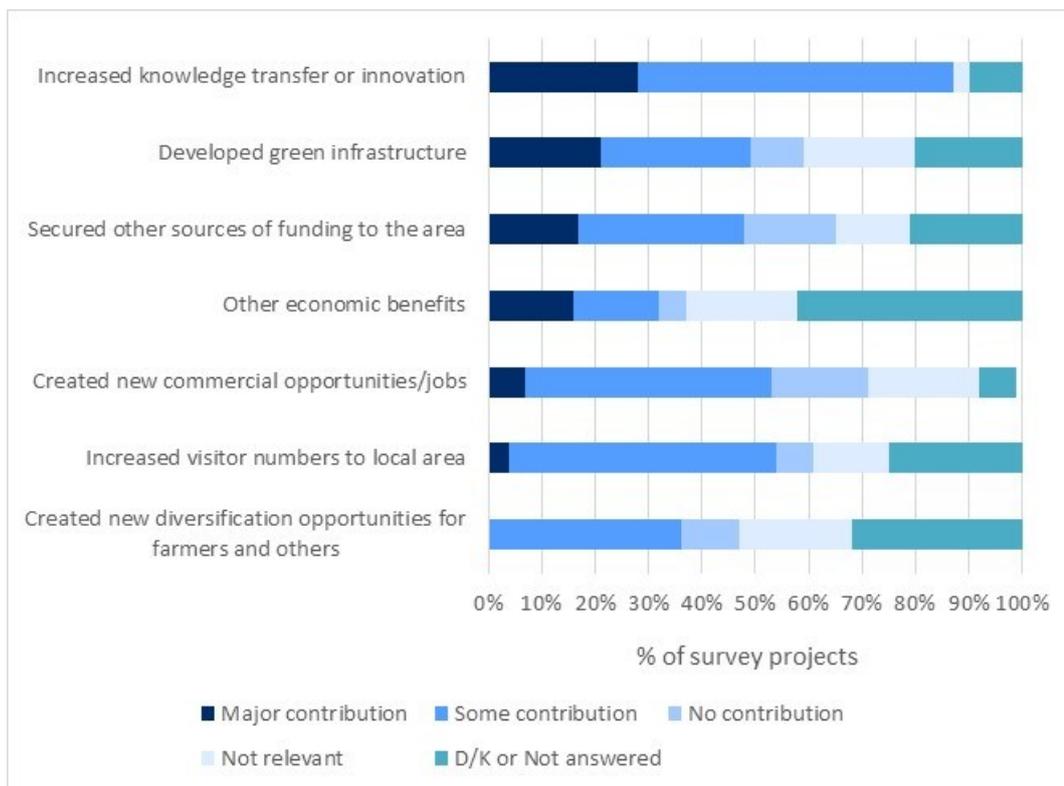


Source: OB3 online survey of funded projects (n=those who stated SMS project would either make a major or some contribution to each outcome. This varied from n=12, in the case of reduced rural crime and anti-social behaviour to n=25, in the case of increased opportunities for local people to connect with nature)

7.8. Economic benefits

A range of economic benefits have been achieved by SMS projects, and the survey findings set out in Figure 7.6 suggests that the main economic outcome is increased knowledge transfer or innovation, which was cited by most survey respondents. Just over half of survey respondents thought that their SMS project had either made some or a major contribution to creating new commercial opportunities or increased visitor numbers to their local area. Whilst less than half of those surveyed thought that their SMS project had created new diversification opportunities for farmers or other partners, most of these opportunities were agricultural in nature and very few reported to have diversified into the tourism sector.

Figure 7.6: Economic benefits achieved by SMS projects



Source: OB3 online survey of funded projects (n=29)

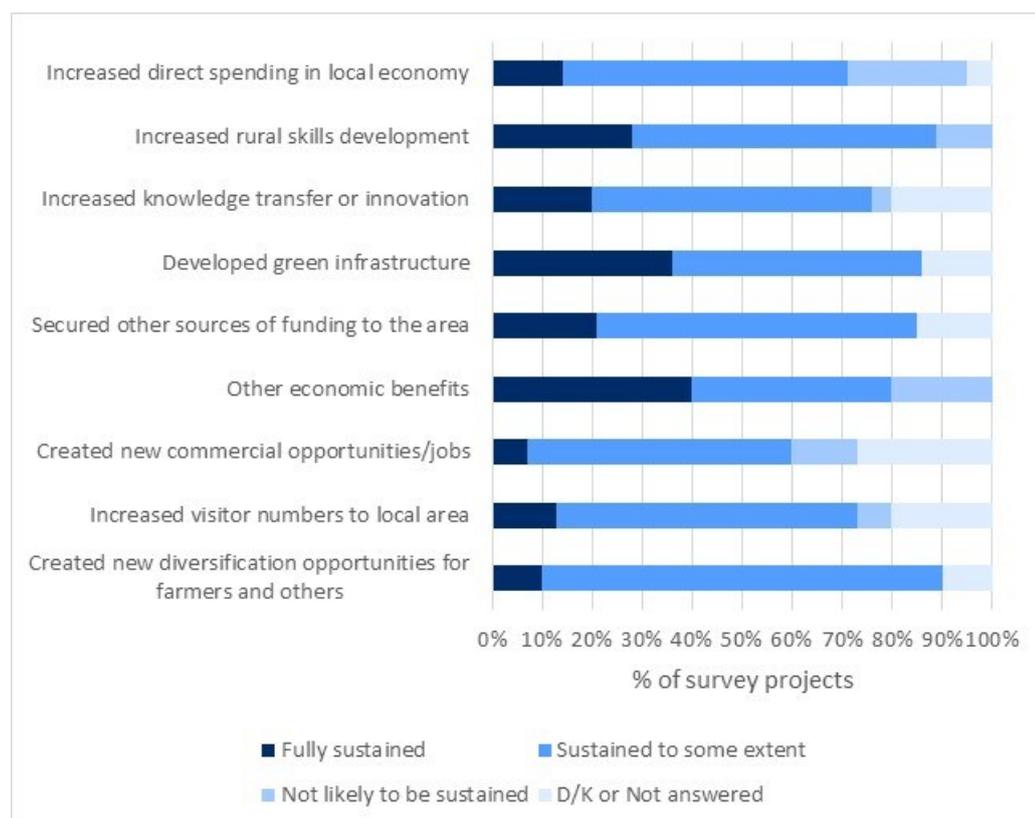
When analysing the findings from the survey, interviews and end of project evaluation reports, the main economic benefits secured by SMS projects could be grouped into the following themes (which are slightly different to the options listed within the survey at Figure 7.6):

- retention of grant funding within local circular economies: All projects have made a conscious effort to spend as much of their grant funding as possible within local economies, contracting local suppliers and contractors and using locally sourced materials and products where possible. Several projects also reported to have employed local people on their SMS project and made regular use of local assets, such as village halls for meetings and events, on a fee-paying basis. Localised project spend could have been even greater, had projects not had to contract cheaper contractors from outside their local area following procurement exercises. In one case for instance adhering to procurement meant that contractors for capital works from further afield had to be used, as they were cheaper than a smaller, local contractor
- support and stimulate new supply chains: In one case this has involved identifying a new supply chain approach to the design, procurement, and production of way marker finger posts to be used along 47km of landscapes across Caerphilly footpaths. Another project reported that their work to encourage collaboration between farmers and local sawmills had resulted in the development of new local supply chains
- supporting local tourism: One project reported that their website has promoted local businesses such as those in the hospitality sector. In another, improvements to paths, and coastal paths in particular, was thought to have helped boost the local tourism economy
- farming businesses becoming more efficient and sustainable: One project reported that a local farm had opened a farm shop and local young farmers are being used to undertake contracting work such as hedging, fencing and ditch digging
- specific sites and attractions have been placed on a better financial footing e.g., one local authority park no longer faces a precarious future and partners have a greater sense of optimism about it; and private sector golf clubs involved in another project are planning to stage a number of major international golf tournaments in the coming years which will attract visitors to the area
- creation of additional jobs as a result of successful projects being sustained: Two examples include one project which reported to have created two jobs via its orchards and apple juicing operation and another project which reported that some of its volunteers had gained employment
- securing private sector investment: one project managed to secure private sector investment to support its peatland restoration, a first of its kind in Wales

- reducing costs for partner organisations: one project reported that local authorities were benefiting from reduced costs as a result of reduced local fly-tipping

As was the case with social outcomes, survey respondents were more inclined to believe that the economic benefits generated by their SMS project would be sustained to some extent in the future, although some care must be taken due to the low number of responses for many of these outcomes. Survey respondents were more confident about being able to sustain the benefits of green infrastructure and the 'other economic' benefits set out above.

Figure 7.7: Whether economic benefits will be sustained post funding



Source: OB3 online survey of funded projects (n=those who stated SMS project would either make a major or some contribution to each outcome. This varied from n=10, in the case of created new diversification opportunities for farmer or other partners to n=25, in the case of increased knowledge transfer or innovation)

7.9. What would help projects to sustain environmental, social, and economic outcomes post SMS funding?

Survey respondents were asked to rank what support they would find most and least useful to sustain their environmental, social, and economic outcomes post SMS funding. The findings clearly show that the most useful support would be further financial support from the Welsh Government (selected at the top priority by 93% of survey respondents) whilst the least useful support would be advisory support from the Welsh Government followed by support networks with projects in the same region. The two remaining types of support were scored relatively equally by survey respondents, and these were support networks with similar projects, and additional training and learning.

Survey respondents elaborated on the support they would welcome. Many of these focused on funding, and the desire to see future funding being made available on a longer-term basis.

7.10. Extent to which projects would have been achieved without SMS funding

Two thirds of the project leads interviewed during this final evaluation reporting stage did not believe that any of the activities funded by their SMS project would have taken place in the absence of funding. Interviewees mentioned how farmers and landowners are under so much pressure, and how difficult it is to get buy-in and commitment from the farming community when there is no guarantee of change and action on the ground. Others mentioned that they had tried and failed in the past to get local groups to get involved, but that funding was required to make things happen.

The other third felt that very small elements of their projects might have been delivered in the absence of funding. For example, one project suggested that around 5% of the hedging and fencing activities would have been achieved, whilst another project mentioned that some of the monitoring activity might have gone ahead. Projects felt that they had spent the funding wisely and had provided value for money for Welsh Government.

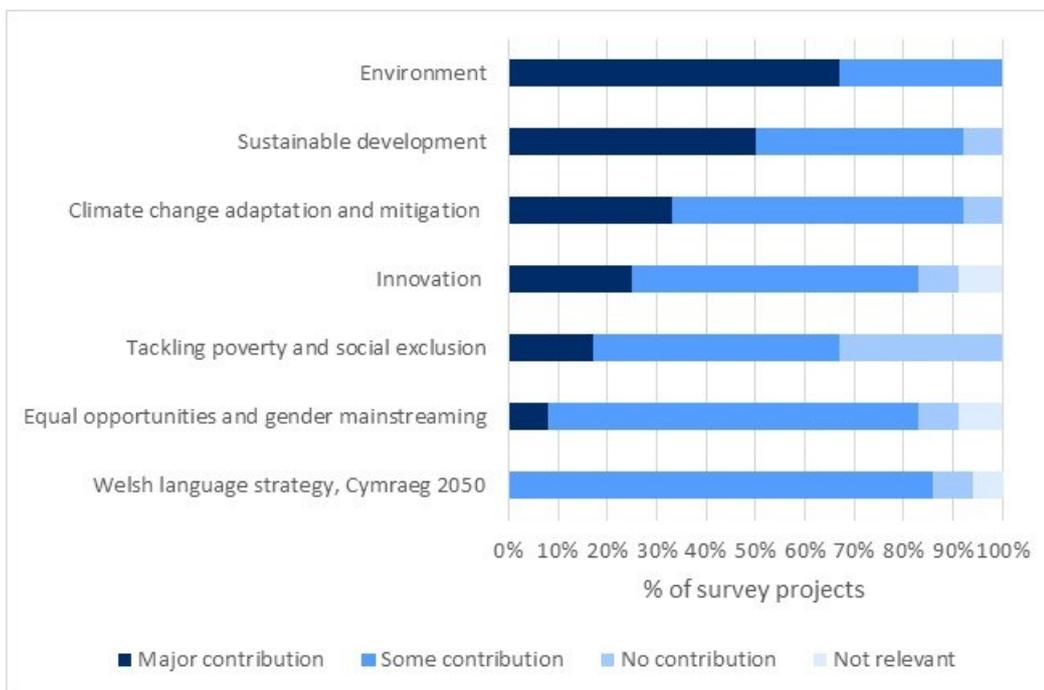
8. Key findings: cross cutting themes and objectives

This chapter considers projects' contribution to the three EU cross cutting themes (equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming; sustainable development; tackling poverty and social exclusion), the three RDP cross cutting objectives (environment; innovation; climate change adaptation and mitigation) and the Welsh Government's Welsh language strategy: Cymraeg 2050. Examples provided have been taken from interviews, survey responses and evidence available in end of project evaluation reports.

Over 90% of SMS projects surveyed reported to have made at least some contribution towards the three cross cutting themes and objectives of the environment, sustainable development and climate change adaptation and mitigation, with between a third and two thirds of those surveyed stating that their project had made a major contribution towards these.

Whilst still overall reporting a positive contribution, slightly fewer survey respondents noted that their project had made a major contribution towards the other three cross cutting themes and objectives (innovation, tackling poverty and social exclusion, and equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming), and a third of those surveyed did not think that their project had made any contribution to the tackling poverty and social exclusion theme. Four-fifths of survey respondents thought that their project had made some contribution towards the Welsh language strategy, Cymraeg 2050 it is worth noting that none of these considered that they had made a major contribution in this area.

Figure 8.1: Contribution made by SMS projects towards cross cutting themes and objectives, and the Welsh language strategy Cymraeg 2050



Source: OB3 online survey of funded projects (n=29)

8.1. Contribution to EU cross-cutting themes

8.1.1. Equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming

Most of the examples referred to in response to this cross-cutting theme involved organisations ensuring that recruitment processes, employee contracts and volunteer selection were all based on fair and equal opportunities procedures for all regardless of sex, sexual orientation, religion, age, race, or disability.

A specific example of good practice highlighted included a deliberate decision by one project to ensure that female project delivery team members acted as visible role models to encourage girls and women to become more involved in less traditional sectors of employment and providing learning and training opportunities for women and girls in traditional countryside management skills. By the end of the project 82 women and girls had engaged with such courses.

Two projects did point to some flaws in the reporting system used by RPW in relation to this theme. Specifically, the requirement when reporting targets to state how many males and females attend events or volunteer. It was suggested that a wider spectrum of gender identifications should be provided.

8.1.2. Sustainable development

In responding to this theme, projects consistently suggested that the SMS contributed to it by its very design and nature. Projects described how they adopted the principles of sustainable development through the integrated approach that was being taken in tackling environmental, social, and economic issues with their SMS funding (as outlined in detail at section 7) However, some specific examples were also provided including:

- finding new sustainable uses for woodlands and other habitats to reduce flooding and improve biodiversity whilst making farms more viable
- supporting the biodiverse ecosystem on the Wales Coast Path so that it is preserved for future generations
- the enabling of habitat restoration that sequesters CO₂ in a way that can also potentially provide farmers with a sustainable income
- sustainable management through conservation grazing increasing biodiversity
- training staff and volunteers in the monitoring of habitats resulting in increased knowledge to manage the sites more effectively in future
- the training of two apprentices and providing courses for project partners ensuring increased knowledge of sustainable landscape management

8.1.3. Tackling poverty and social exclusion

This was by far the cross-cutting theme by which SMS projects were able to provide the greatest number of strong examples of their contribution including:

- offering free parking, a range of free activities, or free entry to spaces (3) – one project outlined how they had worked hard to include people who are digitally excluded or do not use social media by contacting community members through letters and telephone calls
- creating jobs in rural areas or creating spend in the locality through contracting and helping farms to become more viable (2) – one organisation leading on several SMS projects suggested that around £500k had been spent locally, thus directly supporting local families through a cascading effect that helps prevent poverty
- community work in the locality involving young people or local schools to become involved in science-based outdoor nature activities that would not typically be available to them (2)
- directly employing four people on the project on more than the minimum wage, resulting in two of these coming off employment benefit entirely
- targeted offer of health and wellbeing activities in areas of high deprivation in the locality
- making improvements to pathways to make them more accessible to those with physical impairments, wheelchair users and families with young children
- reducing social isolation through the creation of volunteering opportunities
- working with a UK based asylum-seekers charity to provide volunteering opportunities. As a result of this specific example, a project representative had given a presentation to a House of Commons committee on how a rural community had provided a positive experience to asylum seekers and helped break down barriers and negative perceptions in the local area
- engaging with prisoners at HMP Berwyn in the project
- project staff supporting a local school through a project aimed at inspiring under-achieving groups to appreciate research and consider attending Russell Group universities

8.2. Contribution to RDP cross-cutting objectives

8.2.1. Environment

Projects invariably pointed to achievements in relation to their environmental outputs (as outlined in detail in section 7 of this report). With the SMS being a scheme aimed at producing environmental outputs and outcomes on landscape scale, its very design and essence is delivering against this objective. Projects commonly referred to the creation of new habitats, the planting of trees and the tackling of INNS all supporting environmental objectives.

Removing rubbish and preventing fly tipping and anti-social behaviour were also mentioned as ways the project had helped to avoid further environmental damage.

8.2.2. Innovation

Several innovations were reported upon as part of project activities funded by the SMS. They include:

- the exploration of new ways of using biomass
- creating a cooperative of fruit businesses to propagate local provenance trees
- new electronic techniques for monitoring and managing grazing
- collaborative approaches with the police or fire and rescue services
- the development of a slow video demonstrating the impact of improvement in mental health
- involvement of the arts and artists in the project including an artist in residence who created an audio-visual installation of bilingual poetry
- the use of wool under paths (a lost method from Roman times) that was reintroduced and
- the use of QR codes on paths that can store the information (rather than requiring internet access)

Three respondents raised the concern that a focus on innovation was not necessarily beneficial in a scheme such as the SMS. They noted that there was no self-evident benefit to newness or innovation in addressing some of the serious issues being addressed by the scheme, and that 'well-evidenced', 'tried-and-tested' and mundane solutions that worked was often what was needed.

8.2.3. Climate change adaptation and mitigation

At its very core, the SMS was designed to tackle climate change through working at landscape-scale. By its very nature, the scheme therefore demonstrates strong evidence of tackling biodiversity and climate emergencies through its various environmental outputs, such as areas of peatland restored, trees planted for carbon sequestration and habitats enhanced, as already outlined in Chapter 7.

Interviewed projects also provided several specific examples of activities that directly impacted upon this objective. Examples provided include:

- tree-planting and other habitat improvements such as new hedging or peatland improvements contributing to climate change mitigation by reducing run-off, improving water quality, or helping to prevent the risk of flooding
- the appointment and use of local contractors, or conscious efforts on behalf of project staff to minimising travel or use online technology reducing unnecessary emissions
- using native plants and local nurseries whenever possible
- improvements to soil health and the peatland restoration increasing carbon capture

8.3. Contribution to Welsh Government's Welsh language strategy: Cymraeg 2050

Evidence provided on the use of the Welsh language and reported upon in previous evaluation update reports for SMS has tended to be based upon the production of bilingual materials only. During this final stage, evidence of much broader use of the Welsh language embedded in the delivery of projects has been seen. Examples of projects contribution to the Welsh language strategy include:

- producing or publishing public-facing documents, signage, interpretation boards, websites, and social media bilingually (12)
- bilingual project staff enabling and encouraging bilingual networking in the community and with partners, with discussions and interactions routinely being conducted in Welsh (10)
- bilingual activities held including school visits, educational activities, training sessions and online meetings (7)
- project meetings being held through the medium of Welsh or bilingually, simultaneous interpretation provided at meetings and/or bilingual minutes produces (5)
- encouraging non-Welsh speaking community members, visitors, and volunteers to engage with the Welsh language using Welsh phrases and interaction with Welsh-speaking members of the community (2)
- celebrating the distinct sense of place, history and culture in information sharing elements of the project and using the historic Welsh names for places (2)
- drafting contracts for farmers in Welsh

Four projects noted that they were not in a Welsh-speaking area or that only a low percentage of the community spoke Welsh and thus saw this as a 'get out clause' for not producing materials or providing activities bilingually. As such they had done 'what is necessary' but 'have not put an enormous effort into the Welsh language'. Representatives from these projects suggested that delivering the project bilingually was challenging, that the SMS had been 'very inflexible' and that they did not have the budget to provide a bilingual service. In one project, whilst there had been some opposition amongst partners to producing education and interpretation bilingually, the project lead had insisted upon it, seeing bilingualism as a way to add value 'not a tick box'.

9. Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter presents our conclusions and recommendations, drawing upon the review of documentary evidence and the fieldwork undertaken during the final stage of this evaluation. The conclusions are structured in line with the key objectives set out for the evaluation, and the relevant research questions to be reported upon at this stage:

- the alignment of projects to the principles of SMNR
- the management and implementation of the scheme
- the nature and extent of collaboration and what this achieved
- the outcomes of the scheme and action on the policy priorities
- the contribution the projects have made to the cross-cutting themes of the Rural Communities-Rural Development Programme

Many of the process-related research questions for objective two, the management and implementation of the scheme, particularly in relation to the application process have been addressed in the two previous evaluation reports prepared for the SMS scheme and are not repeated here. The key findings and recommendations in relation to those can be found in Annex B.

The conclusions also consider the extent to which the SMS scheme delivered its identified outputs and outcomes as set out in its Theory of Change logic model (see Annex C).

9.1. Alignment of the projects to SMNR

Previous evaluation reports had already identified strong evidence that SMS projects had considered the principles of SMNR in the design and implementation of their interventions. It was possible to visit several SMS projects and speak first hand with partners, contributors, volunteers, and community members for the final stage of the evaluation. In doing so, and when analysing how individual projects could evidence a contribution to the nine key SMNR principles (see Annex A), it can be concluded that the SMS scheme has aligned well with the approach to managing natural resources and ecosystems outlined in the Environment (Wales) Act in achieving project outcomes. There is strong evidence that the overarching scheme design of the SMS has been particularly successful in enabling alignment to some specific SMNR principles – projects are working at a wider scale, are collaborating with new partners or deepening engagement with existing ones and are building increased resilience and longer term thinking into their approaches which results in a wider range of benefits.

There are pockets of examples or emerging evidence too against the remaining SMNR principles and external factors have impacted against projects' ability to demonstrate progress against some of these as fully as would otherwise be the case. For example, the principle of adaptive management has been confined somewhat by the administrative processes of the SMS scheme, whilst public participation was inevitably limited during periods of delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We conclude that a delivery mechanism that funds collaborative action and co-ordinated landscape projects or group activity can successfully tackle the challenges of achieving at scale and deliver multiple actions that are in line with SMNR principles.

9.2. Management and implementation

At the outset, the SMS scheme stated its intention to establish a more collaborative approach to programme management. As previously reported, from a policy perspective, the design was sound. Over the evaluation period, projects feel that the visibility of, and their interaction with Welsh Government's policy team diminished, and many projects described how they have delivered their projects with little or no direct contact with Welsh Government's policy team. Responsibility for the administration of the scheme was with RPW, and most of the interaction with Welsh Government has therefore been via RPW for claims and monitoring purposes. As a result, the SMS has not been delivered or sustained as originally intended.

With committed spend against funding allocation to the scheme standing at just over half at the end of December 2022, and projects funded during Windows 4 and 5 required to deliver within much shorter timescales than originally intended due contractual start date delays, the SMS remains at risk of being unable to allocate its total funding in full with substantial underspend of available EU funding as a result.

Over the course of the evaluation, projects funded across all windows have raised some serious concerns and frustrations about how administrative issues have impacted on their ability to deliver as planned, and on the negative impact the experience of project managing

SMS funded projects has had on individual wellbeing and mental health. There is evidence from conducting the fieldwork at this stage of the evaluation that the strength of feeling expressed by project staff has even impacted on the willingness of some to contribute their views to the evaluation.

Where SMS projects have reported interactions with a member of the SMS policy team, it has been positive and well-received, but those opportunities have been lacking due to inadequate resource in place at a policy team level, which has become ever more pertinent towards the end of the funding of the scheme. SMS funded projects have not reported feeling part of a bigger team, of understanding what other projects are doing or how they are contributing to overarching Welsh Government priorities.

The claims, monitoring and reporting processes adopted via RPW have not been suitable or appropriate mechanisms for the SMS scheme. The design and nature of the scheme, and its intention to fund unique collaborative projects does not necessarily lend itself to be monitored in a simplistic manner. Whilst project outputs are recorded against RDP case indicators, additional outputs achieved by projects are not routinely collected and therefore some important achievements are not being captured.

Projects have not submitted independent end-of project evaluation reports in sufficient number or quality. Only fifteen reports were available at the time of drafting this report (of which only four are in addition to those made available for the update evaluation report one year ago), of which less than half are sufficient in their reporting.

At the Theory of Change development stage for the SMS scheme evaluation in 2020 it was noted that 'project level evaluation reports will...provide crucial intelligence on the extent to which individual projects are achieving their own targets'. It is reprehensible that there are some organisations that have received substantial funding through the SMS scheme for completed projects that have not, to date, contributed to the evaluation process. This includes not responding to requests over several time periods to complete surveys, attend interviews with external evaluators, not submitting regular progress reports, and not submitting end of project independent evaluation reports – all of which they were contractually obliged to do. With such a vacuum of evidence, this scheme-level summative evaluation cannot draw many of the conclusions it would expect to make.

Where collaborative projects have managed to navigate their way through the administrative processes, effective practice has been in place usually because of strong project management and good planning procedures adopted by the lead partner from the outset. In terms of lessons for the future, a more flexible approach to the administration of funded projects, more trust in the robustness of internal processes at well-established charities, organisations and publicly funded authorities would make a huge difference. It remains the case, that until the monitoring requirements and claims processes can be adapted to become more suitable for projects of this nature, the responsibility as a project lead should not be placed on newly established or inexperienced community interest companies or trusts without the support of more established organisations that have the necessary governance and financial viability to deal with payment delay issues.

9.3. Nature and extent of collaboration

There is evidence that the positive impacts from collaborative working far outweigh the negative for projects particularly in terms of increased transfer of knowledge, more effective delivery at landscape scale and improved engagement with the community. SMS has also shown that collaboration improves over time, and that allowing time for trust and understanding to embed is crucial. The evaluation has not been able to observe any specific typology or type of collaborations that are more likely to succeed although those who put in place strong and regular communication methods, utilised some form of facilitation process to allow all partners to be heard, and who managed to maintain consistency in membership and clarity in terms of responsibility were more likely to succeed.

It is also important to allow for additional partners to become involved as projects evolve, and to ensure that key players are around the table. In one instance, for example, the lack of involvement and knowledge needed from NRW resulted in less than optimum results for a project. This could be addressed prior to an end-of-project report in future if more communication and robust reporting to policy leads was ingrained in the scheme delivery throughout.

The evaluation found ample examples where collaborative working at the landscape or catchment area between landowners, farmers, and other key partners, has resulted in greater benefits to local nature and ecosystems than may have been achieved by farmers or landowners operating on an individual basis. As a result, we conclude that a collaborative approach to landscape funding should be a key element of government policy in future funding.

The sustainability of collaborations remains fragile. Across the interviews undertaken, there is evidence of a strong desire to continue to collaborate, but less evidence of concrete plans as to how this will be achieved, without continued funding.

Many of the proposed collaborative actions within the SFS will continue to prioritise the actions supported by the SMS. The SFS also seeks to continue with the collaborative approach on a catchment, landscape or national scale and seems to already draw heavily on the collaborative elements of funded SMS projects. It will be important that the learning points from both the design and the delivery of SMS continues to feed across and is integrated into wider environmental and farming policies and funding mechanisms. However, with the transition to SFS some years away, there is a need to design a scheme in the interim that could support the collaborative elements put in place via SMS or new collaborations that have now matured and are ready to deliver.

The approach adopted within SMS could be a key mechanism for delivering some of the objectives set out in COP 15 and for achieving some of the recommendations offered via the Biodiversity Deep Dive. Work at landscape scale must be funded, as farmers and landowners cannot be expected to deliver these ambitions without financial support. The SMS has shown the need for, and could provide the initial basis for, some of the Nature Recovery Exemplar areas operating at landscape scale and with longer term funding. However, as the sixth recommendation within the Deep Dive suggests, there is a need to

look at other sources of finance to deliver at scale and pace, including sustainable funding mechanisms, as this will be difficult to achieve within the current financial climate.

9.4. Outcomes of SMS

Notwithstanding the lack of outcome evidence available for the SMS scheme at this final stage from monitoring and reporting processes, it is also important to note that it was identified from the outset in the drafting of the Theory of Change report for SMS in 2020 that 'longer term outcomes set out for the SMS might not be detectable within the timescales set for the evaluation, particularly for most recently funded SMS projects.' It is therefore unfair to measure the success of the SMS scheme on its ability to demonstrate outcomes that simply cannot be evidenced at this point in time. SMS projects require a longer funding period, and just as importantly a longer reporting period, if they are expected to demonstrate environmental outcomes.

This final evaluation report, like the previous reports, has been able to draw out evidence of funded projects delivering improvements to natural resources and to the management of landscapes. Activities undertaken by projects report strong outputs that are likely to impact upon improved connectivity between, scale and condition of ecosystems. What cannot be measured or reported upon at this stage is the extent to which these are likely to deliver the intended outcomes in the longer term.

Whilst some projects have evidenced sustainable approaches to maintain the improvements made, the majority state that they will be reliant on the goodwill of volunteers, or to successfully obtaining further grant funding to continue with the work undertaken to date. There is a risk, particularly with elements such as peat restoration or removal of INNS that improvements will be lost unless they are protected (e.g., from vandalism) and maintained.

Overall, projects are performing well against their wide range of funded KPIs be they environmental, social, or economic outputs. Completed projects have reported strong outputs against their case level indicators, having achieved or exceeded 19 of 24 indicators. The scheme would have benefited from greater consistency in how these indicators were interpreted as well as having in place an outcomes framework from the outset to support monitoring and reporting activities.

Most funded projects have taken action which will help to improve natural resources, ecosystems, and landscapes. Projects are confident that their actions will help to increase biodiversity levels and restore habitats, but these anticipated environmental impacts are not expected to be achieved over the short-term funding period. A small number of projects have not yet implemented these type of actions as they are required, as a condition of funding, to complete baseline research and surveys in the first instance to inform their programme of work. In these cases, the environmental benefits are less clear.

Projects were commonly found to have taken action which will help to improve the connectivity between ecosystems as they had worked at landscape level to restore hedges across farms and create natural wildlife shelters. Likewise, there are plenty of examples of projects which have taken appropriate action which will lead to improvements in the health and conditions of ecosystems. Actions such as improving water quality, improving soil

quality, and removing invasive non-native species can all be expected to improve the health and condition of local ecosystems, provided they are maintained in the long-term. Some of the actions taken require less ongoing maintenance whereas others are more dependent upon continued behavioural changes amongst landowners, farmers, and community volunteers.

The evaluation also found that projects have made a good contribution towards achieving social benefits for their communities as a result of adopting SMNR principles. The main social benefits generated are increased opportunities for local people to connect with nature, improved health and wellbeing, increased access to the outdoors, and increased educational and volunteering opportunities. The evidence gathered also suggests that the social benefits achieved by SMS projects are more likely to be sustained post funding, particularly those associated with increased access to the outdoors and improving the health and wellbeing of the local community.

By comparison with the social benefits, whilst still positive, projects have made slightly less of an economic contribution to their local communities simply because they did not set out to achieve a wide range of economic outcomes and where they did, the anticipated outcomes were relatively modest. The main economic benefits generated are increased knowledge transfer and the retention of grant funding within local circular economies. Other economic benefits were cited by fewer projects.

9.5. Cross-cutting themes and objectives

End-of-project evaluation reports have not routinely reported upon the EU cross-cutting themes and RDP cross-cutting objectives therefore conclusions can only be deduced from responses to the survey and interviews. In general, there is evidence across the SMS scheme of equal opportunities being provided to individuals in rural communities to take part in activities. The scheme strongly contributes to the sustainable development objective, with examples of sustainable management of landscapes at its very core. SMS can also demonstrate several very good examples of projects providing free-to-access opportunities for community members to contribute to projects, and to greater spend locally in rural areas. The SMS has also made strong contributions to the RDP cross-cutting activities through its funded activities.

Contributions to the Welsh Government's Welsh language strategy is more mixed. Projects in rural areas with high percentages of Welsh speaking communities, have been highly proactive in the employment of bilingual practices and hosting of bilingual activities to enable individuals to contribute in their language of choice whilst those operating in areas with lower numbers of Welsh speakers have been less likely to do so.

To conclude, with the evaluation evidence available to date, SMS projects are certainly able to achieve their deliverables and are performing strongly against their funded outputs and achieving additional benefits too. The overarching collaborative funding mechanism of the SMS has enabled this, but the scheme has not had the appropriate monitoring and evaluation framework in place to capture this evidence as fully as it would have liked. In looking to future funding models, providing projects with the trust and flexibility required to enable them to work in a collaborative, landscape-scale approach that fully aligns with SMNR principles is likely to further improve upon the outcomes that can be achieved.

9.6. Recommendations

Based on the evidence gathered and made available to us during the final summative stage of the SMS scheme evaluation, we make the following additional recommendations for the Welsh Government to consider in any future landscape scale collaborative delivery approach.

It remains the case that there is much learning from the current SMS scheme that still needs to be captured and shared. It is imperative that opportunities are provided to learn first-hand from projects about the lessons of the SMS, both in terms of its implementation and its successful outputs and outcomes. As such we make the following set of recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Welsh Government should make sure that the remaining 35 projects fulfil the requirement to provide a high-quality end of project evaluation report and actively promote the guidance developed for this purpose. Some projects have found it difficult to appoint an appropriate external evaluator, and Welsh Government should therefore consider allowing projects to produce their own internal end of project evaluation reports (following the guidance provided).

Recommendation 2: Welsh Government should explore options to formally capture the outputs and outcomes that have been achieved by completed projects, that are outside of their KPIs. This is not currently possible via RPW Online. Over-achievement should be celebrated, and projects should be encouraged to report upon them in their end of project evaluation reports.

Recommendation 3: In essence, many of the projects funded in the final two windows of SMS have been 'demonstrator projects' as they have not had as much time to deliver. It is also the case that many SMS funded projects have delivered similar activities but are not aware of each other and the approaches taken. Welsh Government should seek to share best practice between projects and ensure that it informs future funding mechanisms. This could be via an end of scheme celebratory event or publication of some kind.

Many of the recommendations provided in the previous two evaluation reports on the SMS scheme remain valid and should be considered, particularly in the development and design of any future funding mechanisms. They are not repeated at this final evaluation stage but continue to require careful consideration in the design and implementation of future funding and support.

These recommendations include important learning in relation to the design and delivery of the scheme, including

- improvements to the EoI and application process
- the need for a small, on-going maintenance pot of funding
- the need to consider a longer funding period
- increased capacity within Welsh Government policy team to engage regularly with projects

- support for collaborative projects through facilitation
- steps be taken to ensure that SMS funded projects feel part of a wider network, can share learning, and develop an understanding of their contribution to overarching Welsh Government priorities, and
- numerous improvements to the administration processes of the scheme and the claims burdens placed on projects

Some additional observations are made at this stage for consideration in the design and implementation of any future collaborative funding mechanism:

Recommendation 4: There is a gap between the end of the SMS scheme and the proposed development of collaborative action funding under the SFS. We recommend that Welsh Government consider small-scale funding for on-going support for some of the existing partnerships established or developed under SMS. Funding towards a part-time project officer role with the ability to obtain some maintenance funds would be welcomed across projects.

Recommendation 5: Similarly, a small amount of funding to enable projects to carry out monitoring of progress against environmental outcomes at key points in the future (e.g., in five- and ten-years' time) would enable the Welsh Government to learn about the benefits achieved from some interventions over a longer period of time.

Recommendation 6: For any future funding, a development period for partnerships, with appropriate seed money to set up governance arrangements, develop their initial plans and embed collaboration and trust will be important. This could also form part of any interim funding approach so that partnerships are well-established and able to take advantage of future collaborative funding under the SFS.

Recommendation 7: The SMS scheme has funded several successful models and approaches that have improved collaboration with farmers and landowners, including those led by environmental NGOs and those delivered directly by farmer-led or community-trust led groups. Whilst there is no specific typology that is more successful than others, the common denominator has been strong project management and facilitation that has allowed for all partners to be feel fully involved and informed throughout. We therefore recommend that any future funding mechanism considers how this can be in place throughout the funding period for all projects.

Previous reports have made clear recommendations about the need for a longer-term approach to funding. This is always challenging under the confines of political terms and EU funding requirements, and delivery timescales have been further eroded under the SMS due to a COVID-19 pandemic and processing delays. RPW Online has caused difficulties, and the claims procedure has been arduous for projects, including those who are well-versed in WEFO systems and requirements. These have not been appropriate mechanisms for a scheme that is trying to implement SMNR principles. Key lessons have been highlighted across the three evaluation reports prepared that need to be considered in the administration of any future collaborative funding scheme. The current system does not

provide the flexibility required for farmer-led collaborative action, and places small trusts and community interest companies in financially unviable positions.

Recommendation 8: We further recommend that until or unless the monitoring requirements and the claims processes can be adapted to the needs of collaborative projects of this nature, the responsibility for leading projects (and the financial liabilities that sit alongside) should not be placed on newly established or inexperienced community interest companies or trust, without the support of more established organisations so that they are protected from governance and financial viability pressures.

Recommendation 9: We recommend that the Welsh Government explore a more suitable approach for any future collaborative funding scheme. This could mean making adaptations to the current RPW Online model; establish an Intermediary Body (IM) management model or deliver the funding through another organisation such as the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF).

Recommendation 10: Collaboration with key organisations such as NRW, local authorities and Welsh Water has been relatively ad-hoc within the SMS and has been dependent on the interest and contribution of the local officer. A more consistent approach needs to be considered in future. Capturing spatial data and linking to Area Statements and Catchment plans will be key to this and will also enable funded projects to capture GIS data to evidence the impact of their projects in the longer term.

Recommendation 11: Whilst SMS project outputs have been recorded against the appropriate RDP case indicators, additional outputs achieved by projects have not been captured systematically which means that some important achievements have not been reported. Any future collaborative funding scheme needs to establish a detailed outcomes-led framework from the outset that provides flexibility for various projects to report appropriately but establishes clear guidance and definitions, so that outputs and outcomes can be more commonly reported. This will also help ensure that any future funding scheme can report on collective achievements.

10. References

Bebb, H., Bryer, N. et al (2020), [SMS Process Evaluation and Theory of Change report](#)

Welsh Government (2020), [Agriculture Wales Bill white paper](#)

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

Welsh Government (2021) [Programme for Government 2021-26](#)

Welsh Government (2022) [Sustainable Farming Scheme Outline Proposals for 2025](#)

Annex A: Examples of project achievements mapped against SMNR objectives

PROJECT NAME:	Sustaining the Caerphilly Landscape
Funding Window:	2
Lead organisation:	Caerphilly County Borough Council
Grant Award:	295,987
Location:	Caerphilly
OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT:	<p>The Sustaining the Caerphilly Landscape (SCL) project was developed and implemented by Caerphilly County Borough Council in collaboration with Caerphilly Woodlands Trust and several other stakeholders.</p> <p>The focus of this project is on a large expanse of land south of Caerphilly, bordering Cardiff and Newport. It contains a wide range of grassland and woodland habitats, historic areas, and common land. Many of the areas have been designated statutorily as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Special Landscape Areas, and Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation, with a large part defined as either 'Special Landscape Area' or 'Visually Important Local Landscape' in the Caerphilly County Borough Local Development Plan. NRW is a substantial landowner in the area.</p>
EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENTS / OUTCOMES AGAINST SMNR PRINCIPLES	
ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT (SMNR Principle 1)	The development of the Master and Action Plan has improved the previous piecemeal approach. Covid had an impact, increasing the use of sites, but also making it more difficult to find contractors. The project had to adapt to these changes.
SCALE (SMNR Principle 2)	The project has raised political and public awareness of the importance of the area and reduced the risk of new development on the land. The new paths have also diverted pressure from sensitive ecological areas.
COLLABORATION AND ENGAGEMENT (SMNR Principle 3)	There has been excellent collaboration with the Caerphilly Woodland Trust and other stakeholders, notably community groups. The process brought together statutory agencies such as NRW and the Fire and Rescue Service, alongside different recreational users, landowners, community councils and conservation groups.
EVIDENCE (SMNR Principle 5)	The KPIs were largely achieved and many of the outputs are measurable. But the real benefit of the work and the approach taken is down to the enhanced levels of coordination and good will that has been achieved – and this is a solid platform to build on. Such 'softer' outputs are of course harder to quantify.
MULTIPLE BENEFITS (SMNR Principle 6)	The governance structure has worked well and there is a well-established mechanism now in place to manage the area and adapt to changing pressures. It is hoped that the collaboration will continue and that the momentum generated through the project will not be lost.

<p>LONG TERM (SMNR Principle 7)</p>	<p>The plan for the overall area has brought together different interests and provided an appropriate scale for collaboration and management. But the current challenge is to sustain and build on the success achieved during the funding period. With cuts in the Council's budget this may be a challenge, but certainly the good will of community groups and other stakeholders is clearly visible.</p>
<p>PREVENTATIVE ACTION (SMNR Principle 8)</p>	<p>The designated wildlife and landscape qualities of the area were identified from the outset. This helped shape the work of the project. There have also been opportunities to collaborate with the Fire and Rescue Service and instigate fire breaks on the hillsides. Coupled with enhanced awareness of the risks and dangers of fires, these measures have drastically reduced the incidents of arson in the area.</p> <p>Evidence of further environmental benefits will take longer to measure.</p>
<p>Concluding Remarks</p>	
<p>A great deal has been achieved through the project, which is an excellent example of collaboration between different stakeholders. In addition to tangible outputs there has also been a marked improvement in goodwill and positive relationships. Although more difficult to quantify these are of vital importance in taking the work forward.</p> <p>The award-winning Master Plan is supported by a deeper and more meaningful set of positive relationships and a desire to ensure that the area is managed to the benefit of the natural environment and the health and wellbeing of residents.</p>	

PROJECT NAME:	Pennal 2050
Funding window:	2
Lead organisation:	Partneriaeth Pennal Ltd.
Grant Award:	£818,283
Location:	Dyfi Catchment, Pennal
OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT:	The project is an ambitious long term strategic plan to build a resilient and sustainable rural community based on a landscape scale collaborative community partnership of more than 40 partners. Landowners, community groups, environmental organisations, farming unions and local businesses are addressing several local challenges including better coastal and upland catchment flood management and alleviation; improved water/river quality; enhanced biodiversity and habitats; improved access provision; increased employment, tourism, and health opportunities; and strengthening economic and social resilience.
EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENTS / OUTCOMES AGAINST SMNR PRINCIPLES	
SCALE (SMNR Principle 2)	<p>Working on a landscape scale has allowed Pennal 2050 to address key challenges in the landscape including the effects of climate change. The project's Slo-Flo scheme in the forestry and on agricultural land has enabled the project to install woody debris, culverts and leaky dam interventions which help to turn water away from watercourses onto land.</p> <p>The upland area is being grazed using traditional cattle which will allow more self-seeding of native species and greater biodiversity.</p> <p>The project has recently been awarded the Wales Rural Network award, based on 20 years of EU funding, for Nature, Landscapes and Biodiversity and reflects the commitment of 40 farming partners to the project's ideas and goals. Partners have realised they can do more in a group than on an individual basis.</p>
COLLABORATION AND ENGAGEMENT (SMNR Principle 3)	<p>Pennal 2050 is a community led initiative, which was established and is driven by 40 landowners who have committed both time and funding to the project.</p> <p>An informal group of landowners was already in place prior to securing SMS funding, but a more formal partnership arrangement (Partneriaeth Pennal Partnership) and a governance structure was put in place at this point to become eligible for the fund. The members extended the geographical catchment area of the project as well as their partnership at the time of applying for the fund to include key public sector organisations such as the local authority, Natural Resources Wales as well as local private sector businesses, particularly those operating in the hospitality sector.</p> <p>The strengthening and expansion of the partnership has allowed the project to be delivered across a larger geographical area and deliver a broader set of outcomes: whilst the group's original intention was to eradicate non-native species from farmland the project's ambitions</p>

	<p>were broadened via the SMS funding to improve water quality, mitigate flood risks, and improve rural resilience.</p>
<p>EVIDENCE (SMNR Principle 5)</p>	<p>The project has already achieved most of its funded KPIs, and has delivered a wide range of landscape, community, and economic outputs. Project achievements to date include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • steering group meetings and regular work sub-group meetings (20+) • reports on agri-environment and ecology issues (12) • targeted trial of bracken management and ph improvement • farmer and family training events • community newsletters (20) • visits (9) of/to Partnership members and experts by the local primary schools, covering maths, engineering, geography, farming and creative arts e.g. music (linked to project) for wellbeing • installation of village interpretative panels • upgrading 2,760m tracks and footpaths including Wales Coast path • 2,000m+ riverbank and watercourses protected from erosion • approximately 2,000 trees and 100m of hedging and trees planted • new habitats created including ponds • wildflower meadow areas prepared and sown • upgrading of a forestry workers car park to a public car park • 8-language project website (www.visitpennal.wales) for residents, visitors, and businesses. <p>The project has found it more challenging to deliver KPIs which are the responsibility of partner organisations, as some of these partners have had limited capacity to engage with the project due to the impact of the pandemic. A key lesson for the future is to ensure partner organisations have adequate capacity to deliver activities, using project funding where necessary.</p> <p>The project is mindful that the impact of project interventions will not come about in the short term. As such a local ecologist has agreed to undertake a five- and ten-year review on a voluntary basis to assess difference made</p> <p>The project is evidence driven and is collaborating with several universities who are using the Pennal landscape and Dyfi catchment as a study area to monitor changes to the climate and ecosystems over time. The Pennal 2050 project is supporting the SENSUM (Smart SENSing of landscapes Undergoing hazardous hydrogeological Movement) research project, led by the University of Exeter in collaboration with the Universities of Plymouth and East Anglia. The research project is developing new monitoring technologies to tackle flooding and landslides. Sensors have been placed on woody debris installed as part of the SMS project to measure movement over time.</p>

	<p>The Pennal project is also collaborating with researchers from Bangor University who are exploring the absorption of rain via the tree canopy within the local area and also the use of LoRaWAN (networking protocol designed to wirelessly connect battery operated recording devices eg water flow to the internet) for real time data gathering. In addition, it is a stakeholder with the international (Wales and Ireland) Echoes project which includes development of a land management app for threatened species such as greenland White-fronted geese and curlew. Other global impact by Pennal 2050 has been achieved with interest from researchers as far away as Northern India who came to the UK, and visited Pennal, to view best practice in community collaboration on a landscape scale.</p> <p>It is expected that several academic papers will be published drawing upon the findings from these studies, which will bring international recognition to the scheme. The project has taken part in on-line national and international conference events on topics such as the use of artificial intelligence for landscape data-gathering and green capital opportunities.</p>
<p>MULTIPLE BENEFITS (SMNR Principle 6)</p>	<p>The project is achieving a cross-section of economic and social benefits across the local area.</p> <p>At a community level, the project has set an example for others to follow, and the can-do attitude is having a knock-on effect on other aspects of life within the village. A sister community group, Menter y Glan, has recently been established to raise £450,000 funding to purchase a local pub to transform it into a community hub.</p> <p>The project's work with the local school is generating many benefits. Ecology and STEM experts have worked with school pupils on a range of activities, including using big data to map and model trends, and on using weather station data. The project funded the instalment of a weather station at the school and a local volunteer expert is supporting the school with data interpretation. As a result of this work, children have more positive attitudes towards the environment and nature and are developing new skills and interest which might make them more likely to consider a career in this sector in the future.</p> <p>Benefits to the economy include appointing local contractors and suppliers to undertake capital works. Local businesses who are listed on the Pennal 2050 website report that they have benefited from accommodation bookings from the site. Farm owners have benefited from increased skills as a result of training events arranged through the project.</p>
<p>Concluding Remarks</p>	
<p>This project encapsulates the essence of SMS, in that it is a community-led approach driven by a large, committed partnership of farmers across the Dyfi catchment area who are enthusiastic about maintaining the work undertaken over the course of the funded project. The project has delivered a wide range of environmental, social, and economic outputs.</p>	

A key feature of the project is the way that it works closely with the local school and has established good links with various academic partners to monitor changes to ecosystems and habitats over time. Having a committed and skilled facilitator has also been important for the project to help bring together the wider community.

PROJECT NAME:	Woodland for Water
Funding window:	3
Lead organisation:	North Wales Wildlife Trust
Grant award:	£682,614
Location:	Alun and Chwiler river catchments, near Mold
OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT:	<p>The project area encompasses the River Chwiler and upper River Alun and surrounding land, supporting a range of important habitats including ancient woodland, hedgerows, unimproved grassland, heathland, and wetlands. It includes one Special Area of Conservation (SAC) at Alun Valley Woods, eleven SSSIs, part of the Clwydian Range & Dee Valley AONB and areas of common land. The project aims to better link people with wildlife-rich sites and promote opportunities and benefits which are low-impact and contribute to the local economy.</p> <p>The project has developed walking routes, provided new access infrastructure, adopted better management of existing paths, and put in place targeted interpretation. The specific provision had to be agreed through consultation with the public, local authority/AONB, landowners/managers and tourism providers</p>
EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENTS AGAINST SMNR PRINCIPLES	
ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT (SMNR Principle 1)	<p>The project started at the onset of COVID-19, and this proved challenging. They were able to run some meetings on-line but working with farmers through digital platforms proved difficult.</p> <p>There was also a 6-month delay between the date they could start at risk and when they got the final approval letter. This meant that the NWWT had to use its own reserves to fund the project officer and cover these costs. If they had not done this, then the contract of the appointed Project Officer would have had to be terminated before he even started. It also meant that the other member of the team could not be employed until the final approval letter was received. The project officer used this 6-month hiatus to undertake a lot of the survey work and, when site visits were allowed and COVID-19 restrictions eased, he was able to develop contacts with farmers and landowners. This information proved very useful as initial leads which project members were able to follow up on when their work got going.</p>
SCALE (SMNR Principle 2)	<p>Working at a landscape scale has been essential in the approach taken. For instance, to reduce agricultural pollution run-off into streams and rivers requires collective action by 40 landowners. Equally, many of the woodland management and connectivity works carried out by the project team have required working at a landscape scale including engagement with forest operations managers at NRW.</p>
COLLABORATION AND ENGAGEMENT	<p>The project has strengthened the collaboration between the NWWT and the Welsh Dee Trust. The steering group has also been effective in terms of ensuring widespread understanding and support for the</p>

<p>(SMNR Principle 3)</p>	<p>work. The links with NRW have been strengthened considerably and this has resulted in the approach taken by the project influencing the Area Statement for the North East, as well as NRW's future forestry policy.</p> <p>As well as effectively working with a range of other organisations on local awareness raising and engagement with schools, colleges and universities. The project has also collaborated with Asylum Link Merseyside, a UK charity supporting asylum seekers. This collaboration has been innovative as it has provided a mechanism for social cohesion and integration between rural and urban areas, particularly in designated landscapes, and may well influence future approaches. The project manager was invited to speak at the launch of the national Action Asylum project at the House of Commons.</p>
<p>PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SMNR Principle 4)</p>	<p>The project has engaged with the local community by setting up a local tree nursery, organising events, linking up with school/ colleges and providing volunteering opportunities. Despite COVID-19 restrictions the evaluation report cites the success of this element of the project, noting the outputs achieved:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New tree nursery established at Maeshafn Nature Reserve and Aberduna • Traditional Scything training workshop for landowners at Rhydtalog • Action Asylum tree planting event at Tremeirchion: 40 people from Asylum Link Merseyside took part and approx. 15-20 local volunteers were involved. At further 30 volunteers were involved at an event on the River Alyn at Mold • Work undertaken involving the Friends of Bailey Hill at the ancient woodland site of Bailey Hill, Mold, which included sourcing local bluebell seed and identifying ancient woodland indicator plants with a consultant botanist • Mynydd Isa wildflower planting • Coed Clawdd Offa art project and hedge planting with 6 local primary schools • Community scrub clearance day at the Offa's Dyke Scheduled Ancient Monument in Llanfynydd • Community Christmas Tree planting with Parkfields Community Centre, Mold
<p>MULTIPLE BENEFITS (SMNR Principle 6)</p>	<p>Where possible the project has used local contractors to do the work. During COVID-19 this was challenging since many of them were very busy. If more time had been available, they would have been able to ensure that more local contractors were involved, particularly to work collaboratively on larger pieces of work.</p> <p>The project has also trained farmers in sustainable woodland management, particularly riparian trees, wildlife hedgelyaing and continuous cover forestry. The project has forged links with a local sawmill and linked up local farmers to sell their timber and utilise ramial woodchip for cattle bedding and to improve soil health as part</p>

	<p>of their operations. This is helping to embed the project within the area as it becomes increasingly seen as an economic driver for farmers.</p>
<p>LONG TERM (SMNR Principle 7)</p>	<p>The project has already secured some funding through the Nature Networks fund to continue the work for 12 months. They have also had a lot of interest and encouragement from NRW who see considerable value in the innovative approaches they have adopted. This has included changes to advice on the sustainable management of riparian trees, the conversion of upland monoculture plantations to continuous cover forestry, the adoption of wildlife hedgelaying to rejuvenate neglected hedgerows, and training for Clwydian Range AONB rangers, contractors, and farmers in no-fence tree planting techniques.</p> <p>The project has enabled long term sustainable management and restoration of hay meadows on private land through the facilitation and marketing of haylage and small round hay bales.</p> <p>In the longer term there may be scope that the approaches they have adopted will be incorporated into the SFS, but this is some way off. In the meantime, the NWWT are establishing a commercial Land Management Advisory Service and this is partly being driven by the positive experience they have had of working with farmers and landowners on this project.</p>
<p>PREVENTATIVE ACTION (SMNR Principle 8)</p>	<p>There is evidence both in the interviews and in the published evaluation report that the project has made considerable progress in taking action to prevent further degradation of the eco system in the area.</p> <p>These include biodiversity improvements through the restoration of wildlife corridors and reduced agricultural run-off from farms. At this stage it's possible to measure the outputs in terms of number of trees planted and so forth, but the longer-term outcomes will take longer to be realised. Long term outcomes are being captured through the Smart Rivers water quality monitoring scheme they have established on the River Alun in partnership with the Welsh Dee Trust, as well as the Irregular Silviculture Network forest productivity and ecological monitoring plots they have established on a continuous cover forestry demonstration stand at NRW Coed Moel Famau.</p>
<p>BUILDING RESILIENCE (SMNR Principle 9)</p>	<p>There is considerable evidence that the project has undertaken a wide range of preventative actions. The improvements to habitats and the creation of new woodland, hedgerows and shelterwoods will improve the area's ecological resilience, increasing connectivity and biodiversity.</p> <p>The project has included training to encourage farmers to maintain and keep records on the areas improved. At the same time the project is seeking further funds to take the work forward. The goal will be that</p>

	elements of their approach will be included in the landscape scale aspects of the emerging SFS.
Concluding Remarks	
<p>The project builds on previous initiatives in the area and some of the innovative techniques used have been of interest to NRW. The project has also undertaken a lot of community engagement and offered volunteering opportunities. The use of asylum seekers as volunteers has been of considerable interest and seen as another innovative aspect of the delivery methods.</p> <p>The partnership has already secured some funding to extend the project until March 2023 and are optimistic that another phase of this will allow them to continue the approach.</p> <p>There are several important lessons emerging from the work which should influence the way a future SFS should operate at a landscape scale and work collaboratively with many farmers, foresters and private landowners.</p>	

PROJECT NAME:	Growing Better Connections: Biodiversity in our communities
Funding window:	3
Lead organisation:	Cwm Arian Renewable Energy (Care) Ltd.
Grant Award:	£213,975
Location:	North Pembrokeshire
OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT:	<p>The Growing Better Connections (GBC) project is a community-led land management initiative based in North Pembrokeshire operating in the wards of Clydau, Crymych, Cilgerran and St Dogmaels.</p> <p>The project focuses on managing and enhancing existing areas of rich biodiversity and increasing connectivity between these areas by tree and hedgerow planting, fencing, drainage works and improving green infrastructure. The project offers opportunities for participation in citizen science, wider learning and skill development and seeks to invest in community activities, including planting orchards and opening up green spaces.</p>
EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENTS / OUTCOMES AGAINST SMNR OBJECTIVES	
Adaptive Management (SMNR 1)	<p>GBC achieved its funding indicator targets by the end of year 2 and therefore developed a clear delivery plan for the remaining 12 months of the project to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four large scale events at local sites culminating in an exhibition of creative work at the end of the year • Connecting at least 1 km of hedgerow linking wildlife sites at Pengelli Woods and Ty Canol with the support of local volunteers • Scoping the potential for designing public spaces for growing food and delivering education by involving community groups from the outskirts. <p><i>‘Sustainability was the over-riding thing, and making people realise they could be more independent as far as food production is concerned. Generally, it has reached more people than first thought and is having a longstanding effect. From my view, the project hasn’t changed a lot – they got it right from the start – it just needed and could be expanded’ [Local partner]</i></p>
Collaboration and Engagement (SMNR 3)	<p>Under the CLEAN project, volunteers have been sampling the water of the Nyfer river catchment for nitrate and phosphate, and making observations about surrounding land use, invasive species and litter thus providing a good snapshot of the current ecological condition of the catchment. More than 300 river samples have been taken with the help of 30 volunteers.</p> <p>GBC has supported or collaborated with six community groups or cooperatives thus far such as the Cilgerran Fruit & Nuts, Growing Heart, Frenni Fawr Research Group and Frenni Graziers Group. GBC recognise that they are a relatively ‘new kid on the block’ in the area in terms of developing green infrastructure but feel that they have been adaptable and filled gaps in terms of coherence and</p>

	<p>working together. Whilst some public sector organisations are often more restricted in their working practices or by strict targets, GBC has been able to 'get in the middle and do the grassroots community stuff that they don't have time to do'. As a result, they feel as though they have laid a good foundation and are seen as a reliable partner that can get into communities.</p> <p>The project is also exploring further partnerships with local and national organisations to further stabilise the foundation of the project and explore opportunities for co-working in the future.</p>
<p>Public Participation (SMNR 4)</p>	<p>The project has completed a Local Woods for Local People series with two successful events teaching attendees about foraging, coppicing, and other sustainable woodland management. They also ran a series of summer events in 2021 designed to answer the needs identified in their communities for getting hands-on opportunities to learn about rural skills and understand more about assessing the health of the nature on their doorstep. Events included fruit tree grafting, the 'Blaenffos Balsam Bash!' and a bat walk in Ffynnone woods. One of these, the Pic-Nic-Dip tied in with the CLEAN project, a river monitoring network that GBC had been instrumental in setting up and supporting as a landscape connection activity.</p> <p>Their year two report states that 908 people have engaged with the project through 29 community connection activities.</p> <p>148 people have been trained over 19 training days on grassland management, habitat ID, outdoor first aid, tree grafting, tree seed propagation and woodland enterprise.</p>
<p>Evidence (SMNR 5)</p>	<p>GBC has supported the Frenni Fawr Research group and the Frenni Fach graziers' association to explore ways of encouraging more sustainable management and protection of their neighbouring commons.</p> <p>A heat mapping tool available via the local nature partnership helped to identify two sites where interventions in laying hedgerows to link two woodland sites would have the most impact. GBC has done a forecast heat map to show how they think the work undertaken will impact.</p> <p>In the final year of the project, GBC is applying the woodland habitat network concept started on the Frenni Fawr more widely, to improve links between protected woodland sites at Pengelli and Ty Canol.</p> <p>The project has had an evaluator on board from the outset with regular evaluation reports provided to them. The wider team and steering group sit down every six months with the evaluator and look at what the learning is and what needs to change.</p> <p><i>'It's been helpful to have someone who knows the project and the beneficiaries so well'</i> [Project partner]</p>
<p>Multiple Benefits (SMNR 6)</p>	<p>Delivering wellbeing benefits was a core part of the broader aims that GBC set themselves at the outset of the project.</p> <p>The activities undertaken have supported groups in the area to be stronger and have a greater awareness of what they can do to support their local environment. The project team feels that they have done this in a very sustainable way by increasing the level of</p>

	<p>understanding and rural skills – via a real focus on skills sharing in the community.</p> <p>Through its continuous evaluation, GBC has received consistent feedback from people telling them how they enjoy meeting and spending time with others, and how being part of the project has been beneficial to their wellbeing and mental health:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>‘I left feeling happy and energised’</i> • <i>‘Good outdoor tea-sipping, biscuit-munching honest fun!’</i> • <i>‘Did I feel useful? It felt great to give some life to a path’</i> <p><i>‘For me personally meeting so many nice people was the most positive thing. It has been a bleak time. For people in isolated rural communities, you can feel alone in your struggle. This project helped at a difficult time and made a huge difference to our wellbeing. I had withdrawn. This has been a lifesaver for us to be involved in something. I have always believed in the power of groups coming together to achieve a specific thing. This project has made a tangible difference to people’s lives, and it also delivers environmental improvements on the ground. GBC are the right people for the work – they have enthusiasm, passion, and hard work – they are dynamos’</i> [Local volunteer]</p> <p>As a project, measuring social impact is important to them, but they don’t feel as though they currently have the answer. It was felt that a framework from the outset would have been useful for environmental, social, and economic impact. <i>‘We would need to develop that from the outset. It is difficult to see the impact of what we’ve done’</i> [Project partner]</p>
<p>Concluding Remarks</p>	
<p>This is a project which has had people at its core. The project team has worked hard to involve community groups and projects, to engage with volunteers and individuals and offer interesting activities in collaboration with a range and expanding list of partners. The partnership, although new, appears strengthened by the end of the project, and those involved are all brimming with new ideas and solutions to continue the established collaborations made. A strong degree of trust and respect provides the collaboration partners with a strong opportunity to continue to work together in future. Good project management from the outset means that the project has achieved its targets and been able to deliver additional benefits through a clear delivery plan.</p>	

PROJECT NAME:	Cydweithredu Comin – Common Collaboration
Funding window:	3
Lead organisation:	Gelligaer and Merthyr Commoners Ltd.
Grant award:	£255,987
Location:	Merthyr Tydfil & Caerphilly
OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT:	This collaborative project seeks to improve the Gelligaer and Merthyr Common. Its membership includes Natural Resources Wales, Cadw, the Police, Merthyr Tydfil, and Caerphilly County Borough Councils, the Gelligaer and Merthyr Commoners Association, residents, and specific interest groups such as walkers, cyclists and the South East Wales Hang Gliding and Paragliding Club. The group has a strong community representation to deliver actions designed to restore the Common's landscape by implementing the sustainable management of natural Resources principles. The project aims to focus on three key areas; Tackling Landscape Crime, Public Engagement & Habitat Restoration & Creation.
EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENTS / OUTCOMES AGAINST SMNR PRINCIPLES	
ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT (SMNR Principle 1)	Running in parallel to the initial project proposal, GMCA, submitted), a Section 38 application (Commons Act 2006) to undertake a variety of works on the common aligned to the principles of the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources. It was hoped that the outcome of this application would have been given before the SMS project started, in order for the proposed environmental creation measures to be implemented during this project. However, due to changes in legislation after they submitted the application, they were required to undertake an environmental impact assessment in addition to the impacts of COVID-19, the application which was originally submitted in September 2019 has still not been determined. As a result, new opportunities were explored to allocate project funding that aligned to the objectives of the project.
SCALE (SMNR Principle 2)	The project worked at a landscape scale and covered over 3000ha. Working at this level, the project has enabled targeted intervention at key locations and have limited dispersal of issues to other areas of the common. Working across the whole 3000 ha of the common they have been able to have a far greater impact on off roading. Dealing with this sort of issue on a single farm basis just pushes the problem from one area to another. By dealing with the commons as a whole they have been able to exclude vehicles from a far larger area.
COLLABORATION AND ENGAGEMENT (SMNR Principle 3)	Although the project has been delivered by the grazing association, they have developed good collaboration with a variety of organisations such as Fly Tipping Action Wales, Natural Resources Wales, Keep Wales Tidy, Cadw, MTCBC, CCCBC, SWFRS, Gwent & South Wales Police and many more through the creation of the Gelligaer & Merthyr Common Partnership. As a result, more areas have been opened to the public for recreation, the environment has been improved and the local agricultural community supported. The increase in visitor numbers and the responsible promotion of the area has helped to reduce anti-social behaviour issues.

<p>BUILDING RESILIENCE (SMNR Principle 9)</p>	<p>Tree planting, fire break creation & management in conjunction with targeted bracken control, restricting illegal access, creation of way marked trails, car park improvement works have been implemented to increase resilience within the landscape whilst providing multiple benefits. For example, tree planting has been focused on bracken dense areas with the long term aim of reducing wildfires by reducing the 'fuel load' in addition to improving habitat connectivity and increasing biodiversity.</p> <p>A series of workshops and assemblies with 12 local schools have seen over 366 pupils engaged in addition to holding a number of 'Common Champion' courses for members of the public and officers of public bodies to learn more about the common and how it is vital for the local agricultural sector in addition to being an important area for public access.</p>
<p>Concluding Remarks</p>	
<p>By working together, the commoners have proved that more can be achieved over a wider area. Focusing on reducing fly tipping and off roading they have made the commons a more pleasant place for people to visit and use. Coupled with increased visitor facilities such as new car parks and waymarked trails, this has resulted in a rise in the number of people visiting and making use of the commons for recreation.</p>	

PROJECT NAME:	Farming the Gwent Levels Sustainably
Funding window:	3
Lead organisation:	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
Funding amount:	£554,221
Location:	Gwent Levels
OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT:	This collaborative project includes RSPB Wales, Natural Resources Wales and the Gwent Wildlife Trust working closely with farmers and other partners to develop the understanding, knowledge, skills, and experience need to deliver the sustainable management of natural resources within the Gwent Levels. Participating farmers and project partners have taken action to improve water quality, create and improve habitats, improve soil condition, and establish habitat strips for pollinators, which will also act as buffers alongside water course. All actions have aimed to improve the environment of the Gwent Levels for people and nature, whilst supporting sustainable farm businesses.
EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENTS / OUTCOMES AGAINST SMNR PRINCIPLES	
ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT (SMNR Principle 1)	When the project was first conceived one of its intentions was to look at ways project findings could be used to influence future land use management and in particular the CAP. However, with Brexit, this policy landscape changed, and the team had to adapt to new timetables and the development of new agricultural policy within Welsh Government. COVID-19 also impacted their ability to bring people together and they were not able to engage with as many people as they had originally hoped.
COLLABORATION AND ENGAGEMENT (SMNR Principle 3)	The project developed from the existing wider Living Levels project. This meant that there was an existing partnership already working together to look at the conservation of the unique Gwent Levels landscape. The project aimed to work with farmers, and it was felt by some that there was a lack of ongoing input and involvement of farmers in the design and direction of the project, with farmers more passive recipients of work on their land rather than being actively engaged. Some felt that farmers priorities were not adequately reflected in some elements of the project, but it should be noted that farmers were given the opportunity to be more involved, with open workshops etc. but many chose not to attend.
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SMNR Principle 4)	The initial project was designed based on the priorities identified by local community groups during the development of the Living Levels project. Public engagement was not a key element of the project and the outcomes of the work have not been widely disseminated. This is something that the RSPB are aware of and would like to incorporate into any future project.
MULTIPLE BENEFITS (SMNR Principle 6)	Whilst the project was predominantly aimed at improving biodiversity, it did also look at the economic viability of some farms in the project area, and how new ways of working would impact this viability.

	<p>However, this didn't have as great an impact as it could have done as the economic viability reports undertaken could not be widely circulated due to confidentiality concerns.</p>
<p>BUILDING RESILIENCE (SMNR Principle 9)</p>	<p>One of the key elements of the project was how to influence policy and future land management decisions. Whilst the scale of the project and the experimental nature of looking at what new techniques could make a difference would not in itself build resilience, influencing future policy this could have a substantial impact on the resilience of the landscape in the longer term.</p>
<p>Concluding Remarks</p>	
<p>The project delivered some good actions, such as improving the ditch system in areas and improving water quality but could have involved farmers in the design and direction of the project to a greater degree. As such it was seen by some as an RSPB project, but when considered within the context of the wider Living Levels project it will contribute to better understanding of the Gwent Levels and how best to farm them for biodiversity.</p>	

PROJECT NAME:	Local LAND, Talley Valley, and Cwm Du
Funding Window:	4
Lead Organisation:	Talley Community Amenity Association
Grant Award:	£520,000
Location:	Talley & Cwmdu, Llandeilo, Carmarthenshire
OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT:	<p>With a collaborative vision, the project encompasses a region of 800 hectares of farmland in the historic villages of Talley and Cwmdu. At the heart of the project is the development and usage of 24 hectares of a diverse habitat of community owned land, located in the village of Talley. Residents and landowners have co-produced this project to address local challenges of social isolation, the lack of local business opportunities and the need for sustainable, resilient, land management practices.</p> <p>Project activities have focused on improving water retention in the uplands, improving water quality of the two Talley Lakes, developing wildflower meadows and diverse leys, tree planting and actively managed woodlands, improving access for people, adopting better habitat connectivity, and improving soil management.</p> <p>The community owned land has been developed to increase biodiversity and improve access for both residents and visitors to the area. The provision of infrastructure in this outdoor space will help create a more attractive place for people in the community to use supporting the opportunities to improve health and wellbeing, social cohesion, and a local sense of place.</p>
EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENTS / OUTCOMES AGAINST SMNR PRINCIPLES	
SCALE (SMNR Principle 2)	To initiate the project, they defined an initial area of around 3,500 acres, taking in a large expanse of the Talley Valley – and then within this they began the process of signing up farmers who wanted to be part of the project. This led to about 2,000 acres of farmland being part of the initiative. This has allowed them to develop projects, especially hedgerow creation and improvements which cross over land ownership boundaries. If they were working on single farm holdings, they would have been very restricted in their approach.
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SMNR Principle 4)	<p>The Talley Valley is a fairly remote location and some distance from the nearest settlement of Llandeilo. Prior to COVID-19 there was not much community interaction or a sense of collaboration.</p> <p>COVID-19 had a big impact and it led to more people interacting and helping each other. Their project came along at this time, and they found that more people than expected were interested in getting involved. They have organised events and publicity and this has been well received. Working with the PTA for the local Primary School has been excellent and to their mutual benefit.</p>
PREVENTATIVE ACTION (SMNR Principle 8)	At the start of the project one of their contractors developed a detailed Phase 1 survey of habitats and this was a useful starting point to prioritise their environmental actions.

	<p>The focus has been on creating and restoring several landscape and biodiversity assets especially ponds and hedgerows. As they now approach the end of their project period, they have captured on digital maps the extent of their work and produced a detailed management plan for what might come next.</p> <p>The improvements carried out will have enhanced biodiversity and landscape character, as well as reducing run-off and potential flooding.</p>
<p>BUILDING RESILIENCE (SMNR Principle 9)</p>	<p>There is good evidence that the project has already made a difference on the ground with extensive new or improved habitats, including ponds and hedgerows. These have been developed in conjunction with local landowners and therefore every consideration has been given to ensuring that the improvements support agricultural businesses and viability. This means that there is far greater chance that the landowners will maintain the improvements beyond the funding period. This enhances the prospect of an improved ecosystem.</p> <p>The project was not able to fully operate over three-year delivery period, as originally intended, mainly due to delays in getting approval and cash flow issues.</p> <p>That said, they have achieved a considerable amount in a short time. The challenge now will be to persuade other larger organisations to build on this momentum.</p>
<p>Concluding Remarks</p>	
<p>The dedication, professionalism, and resilience of the small project team, who are all volunteers should be acknowledged. As well as a range of habitat improvements they have made a considerable contribution to social cohesion and raising awareness of the importance of environmental improvements. This is not only true for the local community, who have benefited from volunteering opportunities and training, but also in the way that the project has engaged with farmers and landowners in the area.</p> <p>The main challenges remaining for the team, as they approach the end of funding period, involves getting as much of the work completed as possible; and then, through a celebratory event, to highlight their success and advocate that the work should be continued by a consortium of larger organisations.</p>	

PROJECT NAME:	Natural Solutions in the Elenydd area of Ceredigion
Funding window:	5
Lead organisation:	Grŵp Elenydd Cyf
Grant Award:	£252,430
Location:	Cwmystwyth, Ceredigion
OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT:	<p>A collaborative partnership between landowners, residents, Natural Resources Wales and the Hafod Trust to support the resilience and sustainability of life in the Elenydd area of the Cambrian Uplands and Ystwyth Valley.</p> <p>The project celebrates the community heritage of the valley's historical mining past while minimising its negative environmental legacy on those living nearby and downstream to Cardigan Bay.</p> <p>The project has brought together the community to engage and learn about sustainable farming practices, provided better access to heritage and learning opportunities, promoted more sustainable use of resources, and provided access to volunteering whilst preserving the intrinsic value of natural assets and protecting the community.</p>
EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENTS / OUTCOMES AGAINST SMNR PRINCIPLES	
SCALE (SMNR Principle 2)	<p>The spatial scale of the project is the Elenydd Upland Area of the Cambrian Mountains and the Ystwyth catchment, across some 7,500 acres.</p> <p><i>'Working on a landscape basis across the Elenydd area of the Cambrian Mountains has made us realise that we can achieve more by co-ordinating efforts rather than doing things on an isolated basis, linking up habitats and organisations better this way and develop an adaptive plan to meet local challenges.'</i> (Steering Group Member)</p> <p>Thinking and working on a landscape scale has also raised the possibility of the ambition and potential to work in this way along the whole of the Elenydd range and what impact this might bring.</p> <p><i>'Potential to have a series of community-based farming groups along the Cambrian Mountains working to the same principles and methodology in a strong network promoting the sustainability of the area.'</i> (Steering Group Member)</p>
COLLABORATION AND ENGAGEMENT (SMNR Principle 3)	<p>In a sparsely populated area, this is a holistic collaboration between farmers, key institutions such as NRW, the National Trust and the main community institutions of Cwmystwyth namely, the Church, Chapel, and the Village Hall, with technical expertise provided by the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) Cymru. These organisations were brought together by the Welsh Government funded facilitator, who played a pivotal role in bringing the community and partners together.</p>

	FWAG Cymru's role in terms of securing consent, permits, and necessary licenses has also been vital to enable the work to be implemented.
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SMNR Principle 4)	<p>Those who volunteer for the Village Hall and attend the Church and Chapel are seeing the impact of the scheme directly and are getting involved in events and activities to promote and sustain the new partnership.</p> <p>Those volunteering on the Hafod Estate, as part of this scheme and beyond, include a wide range of groups e.g., retirees, the Wallich Community – those who have experienced homelessness and other difficulties, young people who are part of the Pupil Referral Unit and excluded from mainstream education, college students, disability groups such as those who are visually impaired and other groups such as Coed Lleol and Aber-active</p>
MULTIPLE BENEFITS (SMNR Principle 6)	<p>Social The social benefits of the project include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • bringing all facets of a small community together post-COVID and supporting the well-being of farmers, residents and visitors • key community institutions benefiting directly from the scheme – Farms, Church, Village Hall, Chapel • creating a sense of cohesion and empowerment, in a world where many other institutions impact on rural farming communities, this opportunity has allowed the community to feel that it can control some things • creating pathways accessible to wheelchairs and prams • commissioning the creation of a slow-video – a 10-minute video of the Elenydd with all its natural sounds which has the potential to generate positive impacts on mental health and well-being • supporting activities and trips to reduce isolation. <p>Economic The economic benefits of the project include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £250,000 spent on local contractors • as local contractors employ local people, these wages will be spent locally supporting the local economy and the foundation circular economy • Elenydd Community Group's website and actions to improve footpaths were used to promote local communication and tourism which will have an economic benefit.
LONG TERM (SMNR Principle 7)	<p>The Elenydd Community Group are keen to carry on beyond the end of the SMS grant. They have identified small projects post-SMS that they would like to carry out.</p> <p>The SMS project has allowed the group and community to leverage funding of around £80,000 from other sources, such as the local windfarm community fund, to enable the establishment of the sustainable travel hub. They would be interested in other</p>

	<p>opportunities to further develop this type of collaborative landscape approach.</p> <p>The physical improvements made to the land will be sustainable for a time by local farmers and the Hafod Estate, however, should there be a financial cost going forward, this would be difficult to find and maintain, given the new regulations and associated costs coming soon and the increasing fiscal pressure the farming community will be under.</p>
<p>BUILDING RESILIENCE (SMNR Principle 9)</p>	<p>Within the next 5-10 years, the resilience will be seen through the protection of rare species such as lichen, mosses, shingle heath, rare ferns, and birds such as the golden plover, red kite, buzzards, ring ouzel etc, better soil health, better water management, improved variety of plant life on uplands.</p> <p>The resilience is strengthened by the information and skill those involved in managing the landscape have gleaned during the SMS process and the knowledge and confidence to ask for help as and when required.</p>
<p>Concluding Remarks</p>	
<p>This SMS-funded project is an excellent response to tackling global environmental issues by a holistic partnership inclusive of all the key personnel within a sparsely populated area promoting community empowerment, economic, social, and ecological benefits. It is a project that captures the ‘sense of place’ in all its facets. It is a model that marries the skills and expertise of farmers, major landowners, experts in the environmental-agriculture field, key community institutions and the facilitation skills required for a community development process. By ensuring that there are volunteering opportunities, direct benefits to most of the population and the promotion of good mental health and well-being of the public, it is a truly inclusive initiative. Driven by the aims of economic, environmental, social, and cultural benefits, it aims to meet people’s needs today without damaging the needs of future generations.</p> <p>It is a model that could be replicated across the Cambrian Mountains creating cohesive farming methodology, corridor links, habitat pathways, strengthened biodiversity and a resilient rural landscape and community.</p> <p><i>‘The Sustainable Management Scheme has given community/farming groups previously under-represented in securing public funds of this type and in this area of Wales, the ability to do so and that has fostered a unique opportunity for co-design and co-operation on a landscape scale to the benefit of our communities and most importantly nature through working together in this innovative, collaborative way.’</i> (Steering Group Member).</p>	

PROJECT NAME:	Dawnsio ar y Dibyn
Funding window:	5
Lead organisation:	Cyngor Gwynedd Council
Grant Award:	£399,950
Location:	Pan Wales
OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT:	The Dawnsio ar y Dibyn project has established an exemplar collaborative Pan Wales framework to enable a more strategic approach to effectively address the environmental and socio-economic issues impacting on Wales' coastal fringe ecosystems. The project has focused on developing links between existing projects, initiatives and working groups to minimise the duplication of effort, showcasing best practices that offer good value for money. It has increased engagement and participation and enabled the undertaking of cooperative, adaptive approaches to sustainable coastal fringe management.
EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENTS / OUTCOMES AGAINST SMNR PRINCIPLES	
SCALE (SMNR Principle 2)	By working from Ynys Môn to Sir Benfro along the coastal path, the project has sought to build on the skills, expertise, and experience of all the partners and sought to establish and promote good practice which is bringing about a consistency of methodology along the whole of the coastal path. <i>'The promotion of good farming practice that supports the environment has brought a high standard of practice to the coastal path benefiting the ecosystem on the coastal strip.'</i> [Project partner] <i>This is the platform for the development of a Pan-Wales Coastal Connectivity Strategy as one partner put it 'creating a corridor – marching down the coast.'</i>
COLLABORATION AND ENGAGEMENT (SMNR Principle 3)	The project has brought together Cyngor Gwynedd, Cyngor Ceredigion, RSPB, National Trust, and the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority. Each of whom had previous experience of managing the Wales Coastal Path and over years had built up relationships with each other. Whilst each partner is responsible for managing its own work locally, organisations are brought together regularly to discuss progress and practice and there is a programme of visits to each area to maximise the opportunity of learning from each other. Partners felt working closely together raises standards, pools expertise, and creates accountability. <i>'Co-working has been a good experience, hearing and seeing what the other areas are doing, there's a visit to Aberdaron in February 2023. This exchange of information and skill will pay dividends in the future.'</i> (Project partner) There is also collaboration and engagement with local farmers and landowners, a mutually beneficial relationship between partners and farmers/landowners that increases the amount of land that is available for meadow restoration and shares practices that will maintain the land.

<p>EVIDENCE (SMNR Principle 5)</p>	<p>The project is on track to complete all its targets. It is capturing evidence through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hay meadow baseline surveys repeated • Soil and invertebrate baseline surveys repeated • Photographs of each site at regular intervals • Film produced with footage from the beginning of the project and at the end. <p>Further, it is recording practice, such as the RSPB's hay meadow development and this is shared amongst the partners.</p> <p>The project has had access to a Hay Meadow specialist and the RSPB are looking for an expert in soil and invertebrate monitoring to both give advice and to share skills.</p>
<p>MULTIPLE BENEFITS (SMNR Principle 6)</p>	<p>Economically thus far, local contractors have been appointed and farmers/landowners have benefited from direct investment on their land in terms of fencing and new farming methodology that will improve their land and livestock, <i>'the landowners gain from investment of fencing, rent and new techniques that develop their land.'</i> (Project partner)</p> <p>The potential of an inter-connected meadow network along the whole of the coastal path, increasing biodiversity can only be an economic boost for sustainable tourism.</p> <p>Socially, RSPB are planning guided walks in the spring to showcase the hay meadows and to highlight the wildlife and the farming methods that have brought about these changes.</p> <p>Gwynedd Council/Llŷn Partnership have a history of establishing interpretation boards that educate the community on wildlife and farming practices. They are part of the www.ecomuseumlive.eu project and have produced the Coastal Connectivity video that promotes an understanding of the issues amongst the community and an educational package for schools that has an enhanced offer for children and young people, more than litter picking.</p>
<p>LONG TERM (SMNR Principle 7)</p>	<p>The project is looking long-term in several different ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking at local and national funding opportunities e.g., linking the work on South Stack to the Ynys Cybi Landscape Partnership and looking at how new agri-environmental developments in Wales may lead to farmers being paid for methods that support biodiversity • Ensuring that work undertaken such as the fencing, hay meadow restoration etc requires minimal future up-keep • Partners see long-standing relationships with local farmers as things that will continue for a long time supporting each other in terms of good farming practice

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring the staff have monitoring skills e.g. RSPB are training staff to undertake the hay meadow, soil/invertebrate monitoring surveys • RSPB are a part of NRW's Natur Am Byth Wales' Flagship Green Recovery Project that is looking to save species from extinction and reconnect people to nature. RSPB are one of the ten core partners. Practices learnt in Dawnsio ar y Dibyn will be utilised in this project as well.
<p>PREVENTATIVE ACTION (SMNR Principle 8)</p>	<p>The project has undertaken a programme of scrub clearance, fencing, drinking water for livestock, hay meadow restoration, appropriate grazing (stock & times of the year) which will result in habitat restoration and increased biodiversity along the coastal path.</p> <p><i>'A showcase of sustainable farming that promotes biodiversity.'</i> (RSPB)</p> <p>On the strength and success of this project, the RSPB have taken on other fields – 30 acres on the hill and are renting it from a private landlord. It's been unmanaged for years. They will develop hay meadows here too and have undertaken a baseline monitoring survey at the start of the process.</p>
<p>BUILDING RESILIENCE (SMNR Principle 9)</p>	<p>With already indicative species seen such as yellow rattle, Spring 2023 should see an increase in birds, adders, hares, invertebrates, - through late cuts and the right grazing - flowers, butterflies, hares, skylark, ground nesting birds, insects, choughs.</p> <p><i>'Due to lack of hay meadows, ecosystems had deteriorated. We haven't done anything major, little disturbance and the land will adapt to being grazed.'</i></p> <p><i>'We have evidence of a piece of land that's had one winter's grazing after 20 years of no grazing and we've seen the re-emergence of the spring squill flower the following Spring, the seeds had been dormant for possibly 20 years. We have land that's not fulfilling its potential, we're farming in a way that is sensitive and sympathetic to its biodiversity, we're not intensively farming the land.'</i></p> <p><i>'We and the other landowners are committed to this method of grazing and extending the practice to other areas. We are also learning skills in monitoring and this practice will continue too.'</i></p>
<p>Concluding Remarks</p>	
<p>The coastal habitats of Wales particularly heath, coastal grassland, dune systems and sea cliffs, estuaries and saltmarsh have become progressively degraded over the decades in the face of several changes, including intensive agricultural improvement, abandonment of grazing, industry and visitor pressure and environmental factors including climate change.</p> <p>Many species that rely on coastal habitats have reduced in number and others have been nearly lost due to a reduction in the quality of these environments. Safeguarding key species such as otter and chough, improving the range of sensitive species such as reptiles and</p>	

pollinators and maintaining and restoring the matrix of habitats will ultimately result in an increase in biodiversity within and between coastal fringe ecosystems.

Building on previous work done by the partner organisations and on the relationships, they have built with each other over many years, this project is the foundation of the development of a Pan-Wales 'Coastal Connectivity Strategy' that will counteract some of the threats, to maintain and expand continuous strips of diverse habitat around the coastline, providing an invaluable resource for the species that these habitats support.

The Partnership's vision for the Coastal Connectivity Strategy for Wales, includes developing a process of site selection, data collection and analysis in which the coastline will be segmented into a jigsaw puzzle of sites with different qualities, opportunities and challenges that can then be analysed to provide a basis for the selection of strategic local priority actions.

This landscape scale working delivers healthy, resilient, adaptable, and interlinked ecosystems that can provide clear economic, environmental, and social benefits to local communities and the wider public.

PROJECT NAME:	People and Nature – Working Together
Funding window:	5
Lead organisation:	Maesmawr Collaborative Group
Grant Award:	£499,200
Location:	Newtown
OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT:	<p>The Maesmawr Collaborative Group have identified local challenges facing farming and community life in the towns and villages of their landscape which they have set out to address. The project covers part of the River Severn upper catchment, incorporating some 17,240 acres of members' land and NRW forestry stretching from Dolfor in the east to Clywedog in the west.</p> <p>The main aim is to support the health of ecosystems to improve biodiversity. 30 farming partners have implemented tree and hedge planting, restored habitats, improved connectivity, created ponds and developed better access to green and blue spaces for physical activity and mental well-being. The project has also looked to understand and promote better understanding of the threats and how to counter them by use of advanced technology. This is being done by using ground-truth satellite imagery as part of the Living Wales digital imaging project being run by Aberystwyth University.</p>
EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENTS / OUTCOMES AGAINST SMNR PRINCIPLES	
SCALE (SMNR Principle 2)	<p>The area the project covers is a 15-mile section of the Severn river upper catchment:</p> <p><i>'Working on a landscape basis across the upper Severn catchment has made me realise that we can achieve more by co-ordinating efforts rather than do things on an isolated basis. We can link up habitats better this way and develop an adaptive plan to meet local challenges'</i> [Farmer].</p> <p>There has been an opportunity for the participants to visit each other's farms, understand the issues they face and how what happens on one farm impacts on another, creating a sense of collective responsibility and provides an opportunity for collective solutions.</p>
COLLABORATION AND ENGAGEMENT (SMNR Principle 3)	<p>The Maesmawr Group is a farming peer collective of 12 local farmers and their families and includes a range of farming models, different ages, genders, language, background, skills; it is they who steer the work of the project. Brought together by a facilitator, through SMS's facilitation service, the facilitator has gone on to project manage the work keeping the original principle of farming led as a core value of all that is done. Project farmers observed:</p> <p><i>'We've often not applied as we've felt what we wanted to do didn't fit into funding schemes, [the facilitator] showed us that we can design what we know needs doing and what we want to do and shape it into what funders are looking for.'</i></p>

	<p><i>'We wouldn't have got this far without her.'</i></p> <p>This was seen as <i>'a refreshing process that has been instrumental in sustaining the commitment, motivation and energy of all the members.'</i></p> <p>Technical scientific advice has come from Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group Cymru (FWAG Cymru) throughout the process from the beginning through to evaluation and consistent support has come from NRW.</p> <p>The wider community are also involved in the work through training sessions for those working in farming, learning days such as Citizen Science Workshops that collate new, exciting discoveries and a vast education programme concentrating on 600 pupils as well as organising and attending several community events.</p> <p>The tone of the collaboration and engagement was felt to be respectful, listening without bias or judgement, wanting to hear different perspectives. This culture of acceptance, tolerance and inclusion was called the 'Montgomeryshire Way', (local farmer).</p>
<p>PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SMNR Principle 4)</p>	<p>Public participation opportunities in this project are many:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizen Science Workshops e.g., river and stream invertebrate sampling • Training for farmers and their families • School programme - they have commissioned an ecologist (Powys small mammal recorder) to visit/attend events for 12 primary and secondary schools in Powys to engage with around 600 children, including those living in wards of deprivation • Community events such as Food Festivals reaching 400 people
<p>EVIDENCE (SMNR Principle 5)</p>	<p>FWAG's agri-environmental officer gives advice before any work is undertaken and her expert evidence has been the bedrock of the project. She is also responsible for the monitoring work that will inform the final evaluation.</p> <p>The project used geo-tagged photography and data set mapping on a cloud platform to monitor progress at various stages to establish ecological benchmarks. Members feel that the true impact of the work will only be realised in possibly twenty years' time.</p> <p>They are also working with a soil expert on the regeneration farming concept and learning how to analyse the soil themselves. They are confident the work will have an effect in terms of things like absorbing carbon, however, it is felt that it is expensive to prove this.</p>

	<p>Further, small action-learning initiatives such as the Citizens Science Workshops are yielding new information now through identifying things, they did not know existed locally such as the British crayfish.</p>
<p>MULTIPLE BENEFITS (SMNR Principle 6)</p>	<p>Social benefits The project has been an opportunity for farmers and their families to get together after COVID-19 and it's helped to develop a sense of solidarity.</p> <p><i>'Farming can be a lonely life and working together has had a positive impact on our health and well-being'</i></p> <p>It has also been an opportunity to hear about new ideas, discuss innovative ideas.</p> <p><i>'There are several innovators in the group that have welcomed the opportunity to be part of an action learning set in effect and this has bred confidence.'</i></p> <p>The project has felt both relatable and doable, supporting participation and empowerment.</p> <p>Farming families have also benefited from being part of the training events, webinars, workshops, community events, supporting their well-being after the devastation of the pandemic.</p> <p>The community has also benefited from increased access to public rights of way and bridleways and their use has gone up recently. They are funding spend in local schools as part of a focus on landscape measures to make sure children have the facilities to play and learn outside and appreciate the natural environment.</p> <p>Economic benefit <i>'The project has contributed around £500k to the local economy in a circular fashion in that the vast majority of our suppliers are based within the region and therefore employ their own staff and spend into that economy helping with circular/foundational economies locally.'</i></p>
<p>LONG TERM (SMNR Principle 7)</p>	<p>The Maesmawr Group is keen to carry on beyond the life of this project and are currently looking at post-SMS funding to see which opportunities are afforded to them.</p> <p>The quality of the capital work done means that farmers will be able to sustain maintenance work for a period but recognise that if they must fund maintenance costs themselves then this will be difficult:</p> <p><i>'We have to find a way to balance environmental outcomes and business benefit. Farmers are having to make strategic decisions about what and how they farm, some are questioning cattle, they will be making informed decisions in the near future. Farmers are aware that there's more they could do in terms of the environment, but</i></p>

	<p><i>reducing production and income and increasing maintenance costs causes difficulties.</i> [Local farmer].</p> <p>However, there was a collective learning and vision long-term <i>‘seeing that you can have environmental and economic benefits within projects, they can work hand-in-hand.’</i> [Local farmer].</p> <p>The farmers are also encouraging each other to consider new ways of working in the future e.g., carbon farming and training and webinars have been organised.</p> <p><i>‘Without the chance to come together, these conversations probably wouldn’t be happening.’</i></p> <p>The final aspect in terms of longevity is the opportunity to train the next generation in sustainable farming and the programme of learning and education will reach 600 young people from all communities and all backgrounds:</p> <p><i>‘We have set the seed for many schoolchildren to be more aware of farming and how we have to combine food production and nature recovery to help combat the effects of climate change.’</i></p>
<p>PREVENTATIVE ACTION (SMNR Principle 8)</p>	<p>Workshops, webinars, training sessions, and ecologist visits are encouraging local farmers to become more focused on wildlife and to farm regeneratively and develop more habitats to assist wildlife.</p> <p>They have restored some areas including through improved use of upland grazing and provided better conditions for soil health, improved/installed ponds, introduced more deciduous shelter belts, protected water from pollution through fencing and better design of farm animal waste management.</p>
<p>BUILDING RESILIENCE (SMNR Principle 9)</p>	<p>A series of training sessions have helped land managers to appreciate the importance of soil health, the benefits of regenerative farming, the fragile nature of local biodiversity, as well as to access advice on what species can be supported on a farm-by-farm basis.</p> <p>In addition, an ecologist has visited every farm and landowners have been encouraged to select particular species they are interested in to invest in and protect e.g., by focusing on particular habitats or changing habits.</p> <p>Hedgerows have been restored, trees have been planting, habitat links have been created, pools have been restored, wildlife shelters have been created, woodlands have been fenced to create forest floors, all of which help build a more resilient ecosystem. It is early days as this capital work progresses, all the while benchmarking ecological markers.</p>
<p>Concluding Remarks</p>	

Maesmawr have created a unique way of working that can be a model for other areas. They have harnessed the skill, experience and commitment of the farming community, the knowledge and application of environmental experts, the skill of a committed facilitator and the interest of the wider community and the next generation.

Bringing the people above together on its own isn't enough and isn't a guarantee of success and progress, creating a culture for them to respect each other, listen to each other, include everyone, be prepared to hear what outside experts have to offer, to be challenged by new ideas and new ways of working and to have a culture of commitment and motivation based on shared values and vision is the way to ensure an effective working partnership.

The third critical element is seeing landscape as a whole, not restricted to one element.

It can take years to get to this point, yet this group have done it in a relatively short period of time. It is an approach that should be capitalised on and its impact is already visible in terms of changes in farming practice, the foundation of regenerating biodiversity in rural areas and climate change responses, the social and well-being impact within farming families and communities as well as the economic benefit.

It's worth highlighting what a unique experience this process has been for the farmers involved:

'It's extremely difficult to get buy-in and commitment from the farming community if they don't feel that things will actually happen, be implemented, make a difference, funding is part of that. They have years of experience of talking shops, too much bureaucracy, things that suck time and energy, with little happening as a result. As this scheme has gone on, the enthusiasm has risen, ideas have become bolder. It's been an enjoyable process, reducing isolation, inspiring each other,' [local farmer].

PROJECT NAME:	Bro Cors Caron
Funding window:	5
Lead organisation:	Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust
Grant Award:	£490,000
Location:	Ceredigion
OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT:	This farmer-led group aims to enhance the farmed landscape surrounding the Northern end of Cors Caron national nature reserve. It has taken a holistic approach to biodiversity, habitat enhancement, soil health, water quality and improving connectivity. Supporting the adjacent National Nature Reserve (NNR) and protecting natural resources alongside food production and profitable farming is a huge driver for the project. Alongside the habitat restoration, the project aims to improve the well-being of the community, enhancing social connections, well-being and the traditional and historical connection between community and land.
EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENTS / OUTCOMES AGAINST SMNR PRINCIPLES	
ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT (SMNR Principle 1)	<p>One key way the project changed was in how they undertook their procurement. They had hoped to buy some items in bulk, such as fencing supplies, but after receiving a financial penalty from WG for not choosing the cheapest quote they decided to treat each farmer separately, allowing each farmer to determine how things were done on their farm. As a result, the farmers felt they had more control over what was done on their land and were able to plan when works were undertaken to minimise the impact on their day-to-day farming.</p> <p>The original plan was for the farmers to set up a CIC to receive the money and to run the project themselves, but this didn't come to fruition and so the Game and Wildfowl Conservation Trust remained involved and have run the project on behalf of the farmers.</p>
SCALE (SMNR Principle 2)	This was thought to be integral to the project. One of the farmers had been farming in this manner for several years and the project provided an opportunity to extend these practices across a wide number of farms. By working at a landscape scale, they will be able to have a greater impact on aspects such as predator control, although this sort of work needs to be done on an ongoing basis to have any real impact.
EVIDENCE (SMNR Principle 5)	<p>They are still in their delivery phase so are still implementing some of their work. However, they are unlikely to complete some aspects such as the water quality surveys, but they should still be able to show case what the area has in terms of biodiversity via breeding bird surveys.</p> <p>With hindsight, some of the targets were felt to be a bit ambitious for a two-year programme.</p>
MULTIPLE BENEFITS (SMNR Principle 6)	Although the relationship amongst the farmers working on the project was already good, the project has been able to strengthen these bonds and highlight the benefits of working more closely together.

	The project has also helped improve the understanding of the farming community in the wider area, through events and school visits.
LONG TERM (SMNR Principle 7)	<p>The Game and Wildfowl Conservation Trust did apply to the Nature Network Fund for a hare and wader conservation project that would have continued some of the work, particularly in retaining the warden to undertake predator control, but this was unsuccessful.</p> <p>Continuation will depend upon the farmers themselves and their commitment to the work.</p>
BUILDING RESILIENCE (SMNR Principle 9)	Whilst much of the work they have done will build resilience, such as providing supplementary feeding over the winter, and planting new hedgerows to link up habitats and provide cover for birds, without continued work, to carry on the feeding programme and manage the new hedgerows this will not have a long last effect.
Concluding Remarks	
The project has been a good opportunity to expand the more sustainable farming methods utilised by one of the farmers for many years into a wider area. This will have a knock-on impact on the adjacent NNR. However, much of their interventions, such as supplementary bird feeding or predator control are needed over a much longer period, or even annually to have a sustained impact on local bird numbers.	

Annex B: Key findings from 2020 and 2021 SMS Evaluation Update Reports

2020 Evaluation Update Report

The first update report was a process report which outlined the theory of change to be used in the evaluation

The first evaluation update report found that in terms of rationale for the scheme and alignment of projects to the principles of SMNR:

- the SMS has clearly been designed and developed by Welsh Government in a way that adopts at its heart the principles of SMNR
- the landscape scale approach to funding, as opposed to farm scale, allows for place-based project partnerships that have the potential to generate much wider, community level benefits
- the funding criteria and application had the SMNR principles firmly embedded within the process
- place-based or catchment-based interventions have been funded that are attempting to generate greater benefits and outcomes
- making funding available to partnerships of organisations and landowners, and, in the latter stages, funding a facilitation support service to enable the establishment of such partnerships, was also aligned to the SMNR principles and Well-being of Future Generations Act's ways of working
- feedback received from projects suggests that whilst they understood the aims of the SMS and the principles of SMNR, requiring an in-depth understanding of environmental policy priorities and principles is a challenging ask of locally grown partnerships.

The evaluation found that in terms of management and implementation of the scheme:

- the healthy level of interest and awareness of the SMS across a wide range of potential applicants is a strong initial indicator of the need for and the success of the SMS
- the sheer demand for the scheme, the level of detail required within the Expression of Interest (EoI) template and the high quality and number of EoIs submitted meant that many projects in the later funding windows were not able to proceed to application stage. Several unsuccessful (yet high quality) projects were left feeling downtrodden with unrealised expectations
- there is a compelling case for simplifying and reducing the amount of information requested at the EoI stage

- there is a need to streamline and speed up the award process should a similar scheme be made available in the future
- closer involvement with policymakers, Natural Resources Wales (NRW) strategic staff and those with an understanding and overview of regional priorities would improve the process
- the rigid and unclear requirements for financial claims reporting, and the lack of communication and timely response to queries has hampered progress and caused issues for several of the partnerships funded via the SMS, particularly smaller third sector organisations and landowner-led partnerships
- most of the funded projects that formed part of the fieldwork already had a collaboration in place prior to developing their applications. Whilst the SMS has strengthened these partnerships and broadened their impact, there is less evidence available to date that it has stimulated new, sustainable collaborations
- there are additional opportunities for greater cohesion between the SMS and NRW at a more strategic level with a real opportunity to link SMS projects more closely with the emerging priorities of the now published Area Statements
- projects were generally keen to see more opportunities to collaborate with other SMS funded projects
- the key emerging lesson is that successful collaborative land management takes time - to develop trust between partners and to build up ideas. A 'hand-holding', mentor role for the early days of the delivery phase might be useful, possibly achieved by extending the facilitator's role
- it was encouraging to see that some SMS projects were contributing towards an understanding of how to develop Payment for environmental services (PES) ^[footnote 36] approaches within environmental management. Indeed, several projects were also looking to Glastir ^[footnote 37] funding or PES contracts as part of their sustainability plans.

Footnotes

[36] Payment for environmental services (PES) are payments to farmers or landowners who have agreed to take certain actions to manage their land or watersheds to provide an ecological service.

[37] Glastir is the Welsh Government's sustainable land management scheme, through which financial support is offered to farmers and land managers. It is funded by the Welsh Government's Rural Development Programme (RDP). It pays for the delivery of specific environmental goods and services aimed at combating climate change, improving water management, and enhancing biodiversity.

In terms of outcomes of the scheme and contribution to cross-cutting themes, the evaluation found that:

- early indications suggest that the SMS is delivering against its aims and objectives and projects are generally achieving their targets and outputs
- it is important that SMS projects themselves fully understand the requirements to undertake their own project level monitoring and evaluation and use this opportunity to highlight their achievement and any evidence of impacts and benefits at this stage
- the very nature of the short-term funding for SMS means that only direct and immediate outputs can be reported upon over the funding period (e.g., number of trees planted, or hectares restored) rather than the wider, longer-term ecosystem benefits and socio-economic outcomes that can take several years to fully materialise
- this quandary also suggests that the design of a scheme such as the SMS may benefit from considering a much longer delivery period of at least five years to enable some intended outcomes to be fully realised and the evidence of its impact to fully emerge
- it is promising to see such a strong contribution by SMS projects to the Welsh Government's cross-cutting themes, the RDP cross-cutting objectives and, to the aims of the Welsh Government's Welsh language strategy
- the evaluation has generated evidence that should be utilised to inform the way in which future funding schemes facilitate the co-design of sustainable land management approaches and align more closely with regional priorities and needs

The 2020 evaluation update report offered eight recommendations for the Welsh Government to consider for the remaining delivery period of the SMS scheme and wider recommendations that might help inform future funding approaches. They are outlined in Figure Annex B.1 below:

Figure Annex B.1: Recommendations from the 2020 SMS evaluation update report

Recommendation 1: Key lessons in terms of policy design for landscape scale collaborative projects should be taken on board in any future funding mechanisms. The findings and early results of this evaluation report should be shared with Welsh Government policy officials who are currently drawing up the structure for the future funding of farming in Wales.

Recommendation 2: The Welsh Government should continue to ensure that future funding mechanisms for agri-environment schemes build on the innovative and flexible collaborative approach of the SMS but consider adopting a 5+ year delivery timescale for such grant schemes in future.

Recommendation 3: Several key learning points have emerged from the SMS' EoI and application process that need to be considered when developing an application process for any future funding scheme, including:

- a need for a shorter EoI process (no more than 15 pages long)
- a six-to-12-month development phase prior to a full three-year delivery phase
- an assessment process that assesses the whole application rather than individual sections
- greater involvement of NRW in the assessment process, to ensure alignment with regional priorities
- dates for funding windows to be outlined from the outset and adhered to
- swift turnaround from successful application to awarding of funding

Recommendation 4: The facilitation support role should be provided from the outset of a funding scheme in future and its remit extended to help projects bridge the gap and make the transition from application to delivery phase. Facilitators could undertake a quasi-project management role within collaborative projects that are not led by a public authority or NGO until the project management team are appointed.

Recommendation 5: Regional peer-to-peer networking between SMS projects to share learning and experiences needs to be facilitated and encouraged by Welsh Government. These sessions should be regular sessions (at least quarterly in each region), held on-site where possible, and include both Welsh Government and NRW input.

Recommendation 6: Opportunities for greater engagement between the SMS and NRW should also be fully explored. A policy seminar for NRW staff to disseminate the early lessons from the SMS would enable a greater understanding of the scheme. Welsh Government should also consider ways of encouraging a more consistent level of engagement of NRW with all SMS projects across Wales.

Recommendation 7: Capacity within Welsh Government should be increased so that the sufficient staff time and resources are made available to deliver the support required for such a range of complex and varied SMS funded projects for the remaining period.

Recommendation 8: The current claims procedure needs to be reviewed and adapted immediately so that it can be more responsive to the needs of the SMS. Training should be arranged to ensure all Welsh Government staff involved with claims understand the nature of landscape scale grant schemes and the implications of delays on delivery. Consideration should be given to establishing a dedicated team within RPW to allow more streamlined assessment and approval processes, and a dedicated individual allocated to each SMS project to respond promptly to queries.

2021 Evaluation Update Report

The unpublished evaluation update report submitted to Welsh Government at the end of 2021 set out some further conclusions and recommendations in line with the key objectives set for the evaluation.

The second update report found that in terms of alignment of projects to the principles of SMNR:

- there was good evidence to suggest that projects have understood the principles of SMNR and have considered these in the design and implementation of their interventions. There had been efforts to deliver projects at a landscape-scale and several strong examples of projects that are achieving this. There was evidence of new partnerships being formed within SMS funded projects and existing ones being provided with the opportunity to forge stronger links
- the funding and claims reporting processes and delays in the reprofiling of finances were hampering flexibility and projects' ability and appetite to adapt and change their approach in the way that the SMS was originally designed to enable them to do so
- the outputs reported by funded project thus far suggest that the SMS was successful in taking action to prevent damage to ecosystems, such as through peat restoration and the development of flood prevention initiatives. Many of the collaborative projects that are now complete and have delivered their final evaluation reports were evidencing more resilient ecosystems as a result of project interventions

In terms of management and implementation of the scheme:

- issues relating to the implementation of the SMS had continued to dominate discussions with projects with strong views expressed about the difficulties projects experience with standardised RDP management and grant claims processes
- projects continued to feel exasperated by the changing requirements and delays in responding to requests, with many led by smaller or less experienced partners feeling overwhelmed, stressed, and demoralised
- the SMS described to projects had not been delivered as promised in a way that allowed projects to operate according to SMNR principles. The evidence from our two update reports now clearly show that RPW grant administration processes were not fit for purpose for partnership-led collaborative projects with long-term objectives
- a clear lesson for any future fund was that a single team should take responsibility for the design, application, and ongoing management of grant delivery

In terms of the nature and extent of collaboration and what this had achieved to date:

- real collaboration and cooperation were more readily achieved in well-established partnerships. Those projects with strong partnerships already in place had been more successful in getting things done and looked more likely to continue to work together in future. This suggested that embedding a true partnership approach within a community requires a longer timeframe than one term of funding
- the difficulties in establishing real partnership working had been further impeded by delays in approving projects. Furthermore, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on delivery had resulted in a loss of momentum in some projects, with partnerships operating with a more traditional project delivery team reporting to a steering group using regular updates
- the sharing of good practice and lessons between similar projects had been ad-hoc but gratefully received to date. COVID-19 restrictions had not made it easy for projects to meet and share learning, but there was a strong desire and merit in doing so
- feedback during this stage of fieldwork with projects suggested that they fully expected their collaborations to continue post-SMS funding, but this was often linked to an expectation that further funding opportunities would be available
- the start and end dates for projects funded under Windows 4 and 5 suggested that they would be restricted by the need to deliver within much shorter timescales than those funded in funding Windows 1-3. The shorter timescales were also likely to restrict the development of meaningful and sustainable partnerships
- whilst emerging evidence from projects funded in the earlier funding windows suggested a genuine desire amongst project partners to continue to collaborate in future, there remained uncertainty as to how projects could continue to collaborate in a climate of increasing financial constraint. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), larger charities, and publicly funded organisations all highlighted pressures on income streams and staffing capabilities and were now less likely to be in a position to support the ongoing requirements of projects

In terms of outcomes of the scheme and contribution towards RDP cross-cutting priorities:

- issues around the veracity and reporting of case-level indicators need to be resolved so that correct information about the combined outputs in relation to actions taken to improve natural resources and landscapes being delivered via SMS funding could be reported at scheme level
- the lack of evidence on outcomes delivered by the SMS remained a key concern. The second update report had not been able to report upon scheme level achievements as a result. Going forward, information should be shared by RPW to enable the SMS policy team and scheme evaluators to analyse the impact of the scheme. Currently, figures around the spend profile of the scheme have not been made available (which meant that anecdotal comments made during the fieldwork suggesting that there were underspend issues could not be verified)
- there was evidence of a range of partners working together, and in later funding windows, an increase in farmer-led or third sector-led projects funded by the scheme. Some evidence from end of project reports illustrated how SMS funded projects had contributed to social, well-being or economic activities, but it would be challenging to demonstrate the impact of these in the longer-term within the reporting timescale
- very few project-level final evaluation reports were available for consideration during this reporting stage. Where they did exist, a wealth of evidence in relation to outputs are captured, and some key findings around short- to mid-term outcomes were being reported. However, the quality of these final evaluation reports were varied. It will be of utmost importance that good-quality project level evaluation reports are delivered that capture the evidence at project level. If this was replicated across all fifty funded SMS projects, then it would be possible to demonstrate its impact much more effectively at scheme level
- SMS projects had faced a number of considerable challenges, delays and restrictions that were outside projects' control that would have had considerable impact. It would be unfair to measure the success of the SMS without placing an appropriate weighting on the challenging context within which it had to operate
- early evidence from individual projects suggested that there was an expectation that their activities contributed to the RDP's cross cutting themes. However, at this stage of the evaluation, there was very little evidence to provide conclusive findings on this

The 2021 evaluation update report included six recommendations for the Welsh Government to consider:

Figure Annex B.2: Recommendations from the 2021 SMS evaluation update report

Recommendation 1: Welsh Government should consider developing a clear end of project checklist for funded projects to ensure that the data, information, and evidence can be provided in high-quality end of project evaluations that provide robust analysis of project level outcomes and impacts.

Recommendation 2: Verifiable data relating to the outputs of SMS projects, and data relating to the delivery and financial management of the scheme needs to be shared regularly and in a timely manner by RPW with both the Welsh Government policy team, and thereafter, with the scheme's evaluation team.

Recommendation 3: RPW should adapt their approach to claims reprofiling to avoid any further delays in project spend. This should include a process whereby project leads can discuss issues in person so that any matters raised can be resolved swiftly.

Recommendation 4: Early concerns have been raised that some of the environmental benefits generated by SMS projects will be lost without annual maintenance. As such, the provision of a maintenance funding pot should be considered as an ongoing legacy of the grant scheme.

Recommendation 5: The delays experienced by the SMS and the lack of clarity in terms of required reporting of outputs and outcomes means that there has been very little evidence to consider to date. There would be merit in revisiting the methodology and the timing for the final scheme level evaluation report, to improve the opportunity to robustly analyse all possible evidence sources that will be available towards the end of the funding scheme.

Recommendation 6: In terms of specific learning for future funding approaches, the current SMS delivery model is not working.

Whilst the design principles of the SMS have adhered to the principles of SMNR, any future fund also needs its grant administration processes to be structured in a way that reflect the scheme's objectives and is in keeping with SMNR principles. It should:

- be managed by a single team with the same management responsibility for design, delivery, and monitoring
- be flexible and responsive to changes during the project lifetime, and be commensurate with funding expectation

- be informed by an outcomes-led framework that has been clearly set out from the outset
- set up grant administration processes that reflect the funding objectives and bespoke needs of partnership-led collaborative projects
- provide ongoing facilitation support for farmer-led, community grown partnerships
- provide long-term funding stability over at least four full years.

Annex C: Details of funded SMS projects

Project Name	Applicant	Approved Amount of RDP Funding (£)	Project Approval Date	End Date (Financial Completion)
Golygfa Gwydyr SMS	Golygfa Gwydyr Ltd	232,478.00	13/07/2017	31/07/2020
A Pumlumon PES	Montgomeryshire Wildlife Trust	269,319.00	21/07/2017	31/08/2020
Managing Resources Sustainably in the Black Mountains	Brecon Beacons National Park Authority	1,004,155.00	24/07/2017	30/06/2020
Building Resilience in Catchments (BRICs)	PLANED	609,549.00	26/07/2017	30/09/2020
Powys Moorland Partnership	Ireland Moor Conservation Limited	600,000.00	02/08/2017	31/03/2020
Welsh Peatlands	Snowdonia National Park Authority	924,956.00	24/08/2017	31/12/2020
Natural flood risk management on the River Clwyd	Cadwyn Clwyd	330,000.00	12/09/2017	31/07/2020
SMS Eden	Snowdonia National Park Authority	815,444.00	29/11/2017	31/08/2020
The Barrog NFRM Project	Coed Cymru Cyf	299,728.00	19/12/2017	30/06/2022
Integrated Welsh Woodlands - Nature Based Solutions	Coed Cymru Cyf	413,194.00	12/02/2018	31/05/2022
Partneriaeth Tirwedd Caerffili Landscape Partnership	Caerphilly County Borough Council	295,987.00	03/04/2018	30/09/2020
Fferm Ifan Ecosystem Improvement Scheme	Fferm Ifan	696,352.00	09/04/2018	31/12/2021
Pennal 2050	Partneriaeth Pennal Ltd	698,346.00	19/06/2018	31/05/2022
Prosiect Tir a Mor Llyn	Cyngor Gwynedd Council	700,000.00	20/06/2018	31/03/2021
Our River Wellbeing - Nature Based Solutions in Dee Catchment	North Wales Wildlife Trust	700,000.00	09/07/2018	31/03/2021
Halkyn Mountain Living Landscape Project	Flintshire County Council	285,000.00	11/07/2018	31/05/2022

SE Wales resilient uplands	Torfaen County Borough Council	399,000.00	16/07/2018	31/07/2021
Dune 2 Dune	Bridgend County Borough Council	312,541.00	06/08/2018	30/06/2020
Wrexham Industrial Estate Living Landscapes Project	North Wales Wildlife Trust	388,438.00	08/08/2018	31/03/2021
Uwchgwyrfai Common and Community Links Project	Snowdonia National Park Authority	418,010.00	07/09/2018	31/03/2021
Unique Opportunities - Landscape Solutions for North East Wales	Denbighshire County Borough Council	561,391.00	16/11/2018	31/12/2021
Sustaining The Gwent Levels	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds	554,221.00	14/01/2019	31/08/2021
Increasing Resilience in Iconic Welsh Woodlands	Coed Cymru Cyf	563,400.00	02/02/2019	30/06/2022
Coetir Anian Cambrian Wildwood	Wales Wild Land Foundation CIO	566,024.00	02/05/2019	28/02/2022
Elwy Valley Landscape	Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust	257,660.00	13/06/2019	31/12/2022
Dyffryn Tywi	The National Botanic Gardens of Wales	698,000.00	22/07/2019	31/07/2021
Dolau Dyfi Meadows	Pori Natur a Threftadaeth	467,115.00	24/07/2019	30/06/2022
Taff Bargoed Catchment Restoration	Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council	417,000.00	12/08/2019	31/10/2022
Wye Ithon and Severn Ecosystems (WISE)	Wye and Usk foundation	530,215.00	02/09/2019	30/06/2021
Growing Better Connections - Biodiversity in our Communities	Cwm Arian Renewable Energy Ltd	215,891.00	10/10/2019	31/03/2023
Three Parishes for The Common Good	Three Parishes for The Common Good CIC	£695,300.00	25/08/2020	31/03/2023
Local LAND Project Talley and Cwmdu	Talley Community Amenity Association	£520,000.00	26/09/2020	31/05/2023
Woodlands for Water	North Wales Wildlife Trust	£682,614.00	27/10/2020	31/03/2022
Camlad Valley Project	Camlad Valley SMS Community Interest Company	585,000.00	05/11/2020	31/05/2023

Cydweithredu Comin-Common Collaboration	Gelligaer and Merthyr Commoners Ltd	255,987.00	10/12/2020	31/12/2022
Restoration of Rhos Pasture	Radnorshire Wildlife Trust Ltd	349,200.00	19/01/2021	31/03/2023
Wild Skills Wild Spaces Project	Montgomeryshire Wildlife Trust	609,157.00	28/01/2021	30/06/2023
Nant Alan Land Management and Climate Resilience Project	Severn Rivers Trust	268,020.00	23/02/2021	30/06/2023
Cain Valley Sustainable Land Management and Water Management CIC	Severn Rivers Trust	364,715.00	23/02/2021	30/06/2023
Prosiect Goedlan Glynllifon	Cyngor Gwynedd Council	284,336.00	25/02/2021	30/04/2023
Golygfa Gwydyr Wellbeing Project	Golygfa Gwydyr Ltd	70,000.00	26/02/2021	31/03/2022
People and Nature - Working Together	Maesmawr Group Limited	499,200.00	05/03/2021	30/06/2023
Dawnsio ar y Dibyn	Cyngor Gwynedd Council	399,590.00	26/03/2021	30/06/2023
North Wales Moorland Partnership (NWMP)	Partneriaeth Rhostir Gogledd Cymru CBC	699,691.00	08/04/2021	30/06/2023
Healing and Memory (South West Anglesey)	Bodorgan Environmental Management Limited	595,000.00	23/04/2021	30/06/2023
Natural Solutions in the Elenydd Area of Ceredigion	Grŵp Elenydd Cyf	252,430.00	17/05/2021	31/03/2023
Irfon Catchment Resilient Freshwater Habitat	Freshwater Habitats Trust	684,437.00	24/05/2021	30/06/2023
Cors Caron SMS	Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust	490,000.00	03/06/2021	30/06/2023
Wales Resilient Ecological Network (WaREN 2)	North Wales Wildlife Trust	499,999.00	26/11/2021	31/03/2023

Annex D: SMS Theory of Change Logic Model

<i>Input</i>	<i>Aims</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>Outputs</i>	<i>Short to mid term outcomes</i>	<i>Long term outcomes</i>
<p>RDP and WG funding (£30m)</p> <p>Environment (Wales) Act 2016 and Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act</p> <p>Lessons from previous schemes e.g. Nature Fund</p> <p>Funding for up to 50 projects over a <u>3 year</u> period</p> <p>WG SMS implementation team</p> <p>WG Rural Payments Wales</p>	<p>To test an innovative collaborative and landscape-based funding mechanism, to inform future funding schemes</p> <p>To halt and address biodiversity decline across Wales</p> <p>To deliver a holistic and flexible grant funding scheme, which meets local needs</p> <p>To fund collaborative landscape-scale projects to improve natural resources in a way that delivers benefits to farm and rural businesses and rural communities</p>	<p>Scheme and grant application guidance developed</p> <p>Independent support service for applicants</p> <p>Five periodic competitive grant funding rounds, to include an Eol and full application stage</p> <p>Assessment and approval of highest scoring Eols</p> <p>SMS practitioners' group</p> <p>Regular monitoring and reporting</p>	<p>Number of Eols submitted across five funding rounds</p> <p>Number of Eol applicants selected to proceed to full application</p> <p>Number of projects funded</p> <p>Sectoral and geographical range of projects funded</p> <p>Value of grant funding committed</p> <p>Funded projects delivering against their KPIs</p>	<p>Funded projects being led by wide range of lead organisations, groups and individuals</p> <p>Funded projects adopting SMNR principles</p> <p>Project partnerships strengthening and broadening over delivery period</p> <p>Funded projects taking action to improve natural resources, ecosystems and landscapes</p> <p>Funded projects stimulating social, wellbeing and economic activities</p> <p>Effective SMS practice identified and evidenced via robust evaluation</p>	<p>Collaborative and landscape approaches being sustained by project partnerships post funding period</p> <p>Project partnerships securing other funding sources post SMS</p> <p>Improvements to natural resources, ecosystems and landscapes being sustained post funding period</p> <p>Effective SMS practice incorporated into future funding approaches</p>
<p>Externalities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adverse weather and natural diseases impacting upon project groundwork • Match funding, staff capacity and skills issues amongst project organisations • Brexit creating uncertainty for funded projects and resulting in reduced WG staff resources • Covid-19 raising issues in relation to uncommitted scheme funds and potential impact upon project groundwork, leading to delays 					

Annex E: Background Information – SMS Projects

WINDOW 1

Managing Resources Sustainably in the Black Mountains

A collaborative project from the Black Mountains Land Use Partnership, engaging local landowners, graziers, and regulatory bodies it aims to bring about positive social, economic, and environmental change through the implementation of cooperative and sustainable land management across the black mountains landscape. Project activities will include bracken management, heather regeneration, and the protection of peat resources. Planned improvements to livestock access will help with stock management and provide a better visitor experience to the area. The focus will be on peatland and bracken management in tandem with improving the visitor experience in the area and engaging local communities who will be involved through developing a rural skills programme, engagement with schools and the creation of employment opportunities.

Collaborative Sustainable Natural Flood Risk Management on the River Clwyd

A landscape scale project to reduce peak flows into the river Clwyd and improve biodiversity through natural land-based interventions and understanding their wider benefits if applied across the larger catchment. The longer-term aim is to better understand the opportunity for collaboration between farmers, landowners, and the public in habitat creation, reducing flood flows and improving water to benefit the local area. It is hoped that this project will be able to help deliver longer term solutions to the flooding issues effecting people and businesses in the area.

Realising the Natural Capital of Welsh Peatlands

A project, taking collaborative action with stakeholders, including communities, to transform and improve peatlands across Wales. Improvements include ecological stability and long-term sustainable management of peatlands. It is hoped to deliver the project on spatial (e.g. catchments) and sectoral (e.g. protected sites) scales, as well as developing the expertise and capacity of partners to deliver peatland restoration. This project will help deliver the 2020 target to bring peatlands into sustainable management. Coordinated action will deliver multiple environmental benefits through collaboration with existing mechanisms together with capital works covering the current 'difficult to do' sectors of peatland restoration, leading to longer term sustainable management supported through payment for ecosystem services (PES). Other critical activities will lead to more coordinated and coherent approaches covering external funding, training, education, PES procurement, monitoring and research activities relevant to Welsh peatlands.

Building Resilience in Catchments (BRICs)

A project, led by PLANED, delivering landscape scale collaborative action, bringing together partners from across the supply chain including land managers, industry, land managers and communities in three catchment locations to develop climate change mitigation plans, take action to improve soil and water management, and related habitat measures. It is hoped work will be undertaken in three diverse sub-catchments involving approximately 50 farms to deliver actions on climate change mitigation by improving soil and water management and related habitat measures; further benefits include the protection of drinking water intake.

Delivering Payments for Ecosystems Services: Pumlumon

A collaborative project bringing together local communities, land managers, statutory agencies, and businesses to reconnect them socially and economically with the natural environment of their area. By building in a process of collaborative learning with other PES projects and organisations around Wales and beyond, it is hoped this project will deliver additional value. The step to securing tangible PES agreements is one that many pioneering schemes and projects are yet to make; by pooling knowledge and sharing learning from this project with other PES pioneers, this project can make a real contribution to progress on PES more widely. Building on previous work this project will explore and research new approaches to establishing Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) agreements as a long-term and self-sustaining support mechanism for the SMNR.

Fferm Ifan Ecosystem Service Improvement Scheme

A collaborative farmer led project taking landscape scale action on land management to improve ecosystem resilience and the services they provide. A cooperation of 11 farmers, Fferm Ifan seek to improve and manage natural resources in a more sustainable and efficient way. The project covers approximately 2,456 Ha and includes new targeted land management actions which will also deliver socio-economic benefits to the 11 farms and to the wider rural community Fferm Ifan live within.

Barrog Natural Catchment Management

A project, led by Coed Cymru Cyf, bringing together partners from the local farming community to deliver changes in land management practices within the Nant Barrog and Elwy catchments to increase attenuation and minimise flood risks downstream at Llanfair Talhaiarn village. It is intended to manage the risk of flooding through natural land-based interventions such as hedge and gully planting, improved management of riverine woodland, woody debris dams and changes to land management which will attenuate runoff and reduce the peak flow on downstream flood defences.

Integrated Welsh Woodlands: Nature Based Solutions

A landscape scale project supporting priority regions across Wales to maintain and create woodland and to restore, maintain and create hedgerows, which provide a wide range of benefits and comprise more than half the woodland cover in Wales. It seeks to put in place delivery mechanisms to ensure: (a) the condition of Wales' woodland is maintained and enhanced and (b) that woodlands and trees fully realise their potential within the landscape of Wales, to continue to deliver social, environmental, and economic benefits.

Golygfa Gwydyr: People and Forest

A community focused project which is hoping to build on the skills development and capacity building started and achieved under the Nature Fund. In its centre are the management and usage of land resources to improve biodiversity and recreation facilities; develop sustainable community management systems; and promote sustainable communities with enhanced wellbeing and sense of place. This project is restoring and managing a 3-hectare arboretum and sustainably managing an 11-hectare mono-culture conifer plantation (Caerdroia) plot delivering multiple benefits for the environment and the local community.

Powys Moorland Partnership

A landscape scale project to encourage moorland restoration through bottom-up collaborative action driven by communities living and working on and around the moors. It seeks to realise multiple benefits including public health, skills sharing and education. Key stakeholders including landowners, farmers, and communities will create a vibrant moorland environment to boost biodiversity, delivering economic and social benefits. It is hoped to create an exciting strategic initiative in Powys and realise the full potential of nearly 20,000 acres of moorland stretching from the Llanthony Valley in the south of the county to Beguildy common in the north, which can be enjoyed by communities as well as attracting tourism and new business opportunities to boost rural employment and stimulate rural economy.

Cynllun Dalgylch Yr Afon Eden Catchment Project

A farmer led project centred on the improving ecological quality of the Afon Eden and its tributaries at catchment scale by planting and managing native deciduous trees; further benefits include improved natural habitats and erosion prevention. It is planned that a group of up to 22 farm businesses, in this area of special conservation will collaborate on the project. The overarching theme of this project is improving the river catchment, particularly with regard to the conservation of the endangered freshwater pearl mussel. This will be achieved by working with farmers and engaging the local community to undertake a range of measures which will improve ecological resilience and provide sustainable land management.

WINDOW 2

Pennal 2050 & Tackling environmental and social issues through nature-based solutions in Dyfi catchment

The project is an ambitious long term strategic plan to build a resilient and sustainable rural community based on a landscape scale collaborative community partnership of more than 40 partners. Landowners, community groups, environmental organisations, farming unions and local businesses are addressing a number of local challenges including better coastal and upland catchment flood management and alleviation; improved water/river quality; enhanced biodiversity and habitats; improved access provision; increased employment, tourism and health opportunities; strengthening economic and social resilience.

Tir a Môr Llŷn – Land and Sea

This collaborative project led by the Llŷn Landscape Partnership brings together statutory, environmental, economic, and social groups. The project is centred on addressing the challenges impacting on the natural resources in the area. This project aims to maintain and expand a continuous strip of diverse habitat around the coastline, working with farmers to create connectivity corridors linked to the Wales coastal path, opening up recreational opportunities and benefitting health. The Project will also be exploring the concept of 'payment on outcomes' with the help of three National Trust farms. The aim is to create a model and encourage the wider community to pilot and run the new approach.

Uwch Gwyrfai Common Community Links

This project operates in the Uwch Gwyrfai Common stretching from an area of 'urban' fringe to the remote summit of Mynydd Mawr. It incorporates a variety of habitats, with large areas of heath along with acid grassland, a lake, flushes and some mire as well as abandoned slate quarries and some sites of archaeological interest. This innovative project seeks to transform the Uwch Gwyrfai Common by reconnecting it with local communities. It aims to enable graziers to work better together to graze the Common to both improve biodiversity and benefit the local rural economy. Practical activities will focus on reducing fire risk in the area through scrub removal and stock management to help improve habitats, soils, and water quality. The project aims to bring local community groups, school children and community councils together to identify what needs to happen to improve and increase access and recreational use of the common.

Connecting Communities with Nature: Halkyn Mountain

Halkyn Mountain is an area of just under 800 hectares of open access common land and is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and 610 hectares as a Special Area Conservation (SAC). The common and its natural resources are central to the future prosperity of the communities. Project collaborators include Local Authorities, Natural Resources Wales, North Wales Wildlife Trust, the Fire and Rescue Services, a quarry and landowners are involved in the project with the aim of addressing the challenges facing the Common. The project aims to create a good quality, well managed common land opening up recreational opportunities for the surrounding communities, develop skills to help enrich their lives, leading to more resilient and healthier communities.

Sustaining the Caerphilly landscape

The focus of this project is on a large expanse of land south of Caerphilly bordering on Cardiff and Newport containing a wide range of habitats and species and designated areas. The project will be taken forward collaboratively through the Caerphilly Landscape Partnership exploring a public service board model and including a wide variety of partners. One of the key priorities will be to improve the diversity, accessibility, and extent of outdoor recreational facilities in a way that does not damage or compromise the habitats and species supported in the area. This will also include support for an NHS Exercise specialist to work with some of the deprived communities near Caerphilly looking at opportunities for supported walking exercise and sign posting natural areas for mild conditions that may benefit from being outside in these areas.

Biodiversity Means Business

The focus of this project is centred on the large (550ha) rurally located Wrexham Industrial Estate and its surrounding rural communities. Through a collaborative approach involving businesses, landowners, farmers, and community groups the aim is to improve the resilience of the ecosystems across the landscape while making the area positively attractive to businesses. A focus on green infrastructure including planting wildflowers, restoring public footpaths, planting native trees, encouraging the use of sustainable drainage, and demonstrating soft engineering techniques will help with surface water retention and improve wildlife corridors as well as creating a nicer place to work for employees working in the area. Engaging with surrounding local communities and offering volunteering opportunities to become involved with the project creating a sense of place.

North Wales Moorland Partnership

This collaborative project based in the Berwyn and Migneint in North Wales is taking action on moorland enhancement through bottom-up collaborative action, driven by those living and working on and around the moors. The landscape has a variety of habitats and is enjoyed by many visitors and communities attracting tourism and business opportunities. The area also experiences challenges such as fly-tipping, vandalism, and illegal off-roading. Together they are taking action using scientific evidence and their skills and expertise to address the challenges and improve heather management and grazing regimes to bring the habitat back into favourable condition. The long-term aim is to achieve the return of grouse, lapwing, curlew, and golden plover.

Dolau Dyfi Meadows

This collaborative project is focused on joining up natural resources with health and well-being benefits in the Dyfi area. The project aims to help tackle challenges by improving targeted areas of the landscape and connecting people with nature. Investment will also be available for access works and promotion, encouraging locals and visitors to use the outdoors and create safe spaces and enjoyable places to visit. Further activities include establishing a local volunteer network, art projects and a potential “walking to health” programme. Project beneficiaries include farm businesses and rural communities, including through the employment of local contractors and boosts for local tourism businesses.

Natural Solutions to Landscapes for Living

The collaborative approach to this project brings together 10 organisations with a common goal to tackle issues impacting on the rural communities across their landscape. The shared aim is to unlock the potential of approximately 40 sites across the landscape to improve habitats and soil condition, reverse the loss of species, improve nutrient recycling, and increase the amount of carbon store potential. The project aims to help rejuvenate traditional land management skills alongside the development of new skills and potential business opportunities drawing on the breadth of experience across the range of collaborators and through the engagement of young people in the area.

Increasing Resilience in Iconic Welsh Woodlands

This project aims to focus on and improve our iconic Welsh woodland habitats, as most of these iconic and ancient woodlands are held in private ownership collaboration between landowners, managers and users is key to success. The project will build on the existing engagement and partnership working happening in several woodland sites across Wales. This will enable the sharing of ideas and knowledge across these sites to ensure the right actions are taken forward to tackle threats such as invasive species and diseases. The project will also help increase timber production sustainably, explore other income generating opportunities and test options for post-Brexit support for woodlands to help move towards self-sustaining models of support.

Our River Wellbeing: Nature Based Solutions in the Dee Catchment

The focus of this project spans the entire Dee catchment in North Wales including several rivers, lakes, and reservoirs. The area encompasses five local authorities, the National Park and includes several designated land areas. The project aims to tackle the numerous challenges facing the catchment from flooding, soil erosion and water quality issues through to long term unemployment and social deprivation through developing a group of collaborating organisations including Dee Valley AONB, Natural Resources Wales, Wildlife Trusts & the Clwydian range and National Park to implement nature-based solutions and engage the community.

South East Wales Resilient Uplands

The upland landscape across Torfaen, Caerphilly and Blaenau Gwent faces several challenges from landscape crime, loss of habitats to poor infrastructure and fragmented communities. Building on previous community engagement the project will take forward new collaborative action to improve the uplands, support farm enterprise, improve visitor experiences and create more resilient communities. The project's collaborative approach includes the three local authorities, police, fire and rescue services, commons associations, action groups, farming unions and Brecon Beacons National Park. The initial focus will be on land management to improve soils and water quality, biodiversity, and carbon storage. Strengthening relationships between stakeholders and commoners to support upland communities, building capacity through volunteering, training, and community engagement, increasing farm competitiveness and viability through diversification and the development of innovative business opportunities will also be the project aims.

Dunes to Dunes: Sustainable Management of Bridgend Coastal Landscape

This project area spans the dune landscapes of the Kenfig Burrows and Merthyr Mawr Warren dune systems in south Wales. The projects aim to build a lasting collaboration of land and reserve manager and landowners, users, and beneficiaries. To help achieve the sustainable management of this coastal landscape improving biodiversity and providing benefits to local communities. The project aims to maximise the health and well-being opportunities of the area through accessible well maintained walking routes and quality green spaces. The project will also work collaboratively with local businesses such as the Golf club supporting them with their ongoing sustainable performance with the ambition to achieve the GEO Certified Eco label.

WINDOW 3

Healing & Memory (South West Anglesey)

This collaborative landscape-scale project aims to revitalise the landscapes of south west Anglesey by improving the ecosystems and enhancing the access opportunities for people to enjoy the rich natural resources of the area. The project includes action to improve riverine, wetland, coastal and terrestrial habitats. The project seeks to improve access to the area both physically through improved infrastructure and socially by making available historic information and linking to remaining World War II military infrastructure. A new high-quality footpath linking the area with the Wales Coastal Path and exploring the potential for the creation of a new off-road cycle track linking local beaches and sites of interest. Work such as fencing and invasive species removal will also be done to help improve riverbanks to restore habitats and help improve water quality.

Coetir Anian – Cambrian Wildwood

Located in Bwlch Corog in the Cambrian Mountains this project focuses on a 140ha area restoring habitats and connecting woodlands helping to increase ecosystem resilience and improve biodiversity. It will undertake activities such as blocking drainage grips and increasing woodland cover to help reduce and manage surface water flow, improve water quality, and increase carbon storage in soils and trees. The project will also improve access to provide opportunities to exercise and enjoy nature. There are also plans for public engagement, opportunities for skill development, an educational programme for primary schools, courses for teenagers and activities on site, including volunteering.

Taff Bargoed Catchment Restoration

This project aims to deliver sustainable catchment management of the Taff-Bargoed river in Merthyr Tydfil. The collaboration consists of an established partnership group and members of the local community and at the heart of the project is the restoration of the silted-up lake in Parc Taff Bargoed. The project seeks to implement sustainable upland interventions which will: restore a popular amenity for local communities to use and enjoy; reduce siltation of the water environment; enhance biodiversity and ecological resilience; improve water quality; and reduce the flood risk to local communities. Local farms, leisure businesses and the communities of Bedlinog, Trelewis and Treharris will be the key beneficiaries.

Cydweithredu Comin – Common Collaboration

This collaborative project seeks to improve the Gelligaer and Merthyr Common. Its membership includes Natural Resources Wales, Cadw, the Police, Merthyr Tydfil, and Caerphilly County Borough Councils, the Gelligaer and Merthyr Commoners Association, residents, and specific interest groups such as walkers, cyclists and the South East Wales Hang Gliding and Paragliding Club. The group has a strong community representation to deliver actions designed to restore the Common's landscape by implementing the sustainable management of natural Resources principles. The project seeks to address a number of social factors in particular anti-social behaviour like illegal off-road vehicles, fly-tipping and roadside littering as well as fly-grazing and reduced land management as well as sustainable grazing and habitat restoration.

Dyffryn Tywi: Tirwedd Hanes Ein Bro – Tywi Valley Historic Landscape

This landscape scale collaborative project aims to join up and integrate the management of an area of the Tywi Valley between Carmarthen and Llandeilo to benefit wildlife, heritage, and communities through a strengthened network of landowners, land managers, and experts. The project will enable landowners and managers to access specialist information and advice and works to improve the historic parkland. The area is a great destination for a wide variety of outdoor recreational activities including walking, running, cycling, archaeology, horticulture volunteering, ecological surveying, and farming. The health improvement opportunities offered by the project also include working with Down To Earth, an award-winning social enterprise.

Growing Better Connections: Biodiversity in our Communities

The Growing Better Connections project is a community-led land management initiative based in north Pembrokeshire operating in the wards of Clydau, Crymych, Cilgerran and St Dogmaels. The project will focus managing and enhancing existing areas of rich biodiversity and increasing connectivity between these areas by tree and hedgerow planting, fencing, drainage works and improving green infrastructure. The project offers opportunities for participation in citizen science, wider learning and skill development and seeks to invest in community activities, including planting orchards and opening-up green spaces.

Farming the Gwent Levels Sustainably

This collaborative project includes RSPB Wales, Natural Resources Wales and the Gwent Wildlife Trust working closely with farmers and other partners to develop the understanding, knowledge, skills, and experience need to deliver the sustainable management of natural resources within the Gwent Levels. Participating farmers and project partners will take action to improve water quality, habitat improvement and creation, improving soil condition, and establishing habitat strips for pollinators, which will also act as buffers alongside water course. All actions aiming to Improve the environment of the Gwent Levels for people and nature, whilst supporting sustainable farm businesses.

Wye Ithon & Severn Ecosystems (WISE)

This collaborative project will work with an established catchment partnership, including landowners and local communities to improve the natural resources in a large landscape travelling down a stretch of the Wye catchment. Action will be taken to improve soil quality in agricultural land, create woodland to maximise the potential for reducing flood risk, habitat improvement for better biodiversity and water quality and improved infrastructure on farmyards to reduce pollution. The project aims to involve the rural communities and agricultural businesses in the area to help them understand and take action to ensure long term improvement of ecosystems and understand the services these ecosystems provide that are vital for helping address the impacts of climate change and flooding, and in turn providing opportunities for improved health and well-being.

Elwy Valley Landscape

The project spans 23,500 hectares in collaboration with NRW, Welsh Government, partner organisations and several landowners and individuals. The project will provide advice and support for woodland owners to restore, manage, buffer, and extend the woodland network, manage ancient trees, and enhance connectivity between the anticipated 60 sites. Work with Bangor University to monitor fallow deer and look any impact on the control of animal diseases and to understand the distribution and density of the deer populations at this scale and determine the impacts of deer on biodiversity. The creation of a skills hub in the area offering all the various skills needed to manage the local woodland, working with the Red Squirrel Trust and North East Wales Wildlife Trust on Control of non-native species e.g., Himalayan balsam.

WINDOW 4

Cain Valley sustainable land and water management project

A partnership including the farming community of the Cain Valley catchment and aims to reduce diffuse pollution in the catchment to 'slow the flow' to improve biodiversity. Project activities will include construction of reedbeds, creating riparian corridors, planting, and restoring new hedgerows and woodland, building otter holts, constructing riverside paths, and creating a 'natural community conservation area. The project will also develop an education programme for local schools and groups and provide access to outdoor space for individuals with mental health conditions.

Camlad Valley Project

This is a farmer led project delivering landscape scale management with the aim of improving ecosystem resilience and enabling productive resilient agricultural businesses. The biodiversity of the Camlad Valley will be enhanced through bottom-up collaborative action taken by those that live and work in the area. Landowners, farmers, communities, and key stakeholders will focus on restoration of traditional lowland wet grassland habitat to deliver a healthy, resilient, and diverse ecosystem. The project will take a placed base approach to shape and understand local priorities including actions to support their much loved, diminishing local population of ground nesting birds. The project will use these species as key indicators to measure the general health of the ecosystem. The project will also provide opportunities for involvement through volunteering and explore the benefits of this on health and wellbeing.

Irfon Catchment Resilient Freshwater Habitats

The Irfon catchment in Mid-Wales is a Special Area of Conservation designated for its exceptional freshwater biodiversity. The project aims to deliver actions to improve the water quality through a collaboration of local farmers, landowners, rural businesses, foresters, statutory organisations, specialist freshwater NGOs and the water industry. The project will deliver practical measures to tackle diffuse and point source pollution in strategic locations by reducing pollutant runoff through farm soil and nutrient management, tree, and woodland planting, reducing point source inputs and implementing natural flood risk management (NFRM) techniques. The project will encourage public engagement in the management and monitoring of water quality, using citizen science. Social prescribing will be trialled in the area based around the water environment, to maximise health benefits. A comprehensive monitoring programme will ensure that actions and information from the project are of wide relevance to maintaining the resilience of freshwaters in Wales.

The Three Parishes – for the Common Good

The commoners of Llanwrthwl, Llysdimam and Llanfihangel Bryn-Pabuan have come together to actively manage their local commons creating a more sustainable resilient landscape supporting improved biodiversity. This partnership will be managing the heathland, the flora-rich rhos pasture, ffridd and woodland within the project area. Commoners and volunteer groups will also create and enhance existing pools and wetlands, tackle bracken using different techniques and graze sustainably with cattle and ponies. The project also aims to increase outward bound opportunities and tourism by improving signage, interpretation, and support for educational visits. The collaboration includes the National Trust and RSPB providing expertise in delivery, monitoring & evaluation.

Wild Skills Wild Spaces Project

An innovative collaboration between the Welsh NHS and the Montgomeryshire Wildlife Trust (MWT) the project will deliver a range of nature-based solutions to improve the health, skills, and well-being of our local communities. New and existing habitats will be created and managed with project groups to spend meaningful time understanding and managing areas of local wildlife value. The nature reserves improved by the project will enable local communities to safely explore riverside habitats, woodlands, grasslands, canal side, wetland, and upland environments. The project will also focus on developing a structured, accredited programme of nature-based activities to enable people to participate in the 'Five Ways to Wellbeing.', that improve health & wellbeing, develop new skills, build confidence, and reduce social isolation. The aim is for this to be available for direct referral from the NHS and GP's as well as openly to local communities across Montgomeryshire.

Restoration of Rhos Pasture

This project is a collaboration of local farmers, land managers, tourism businesses, environmental groups, and arts & culture businesses with the aim of landscape scale restoration of the iconic Welsh habitat of Rhos pasture in north Brecknock and west Radnorshire. The project will deliver actions to restore the existing marshy grassland areas to be more resilient, diverse, species rich grazing land. The outcomes of this work will include decreasing soil compaction, improving soil structure and enhancing the capacity to store carbon and water, slowing run-off and erosion. The existing Rhos Pasture will once again become connected as a continuous landscape feature. The collaboration will go on to celebrate the cultural, inspirational, and aesthetical value of the Rhos Pasture habitat in a modern Wales. Improved access for both local communities and visitors to this special landscape will provide a range of recreational and outdoor exercise opportunities.

Woodlands for Water

The project area encompasses the River Wheeler and upper River Alyn and surrounding land, supporting a range of important habitats including ancient woodland, unimproved grassland, heathland, and wetlands. It includes one SAC (Alyn Valley Woods), eleven SSSIs, part of the Clwydian Range & Dee Valley AONB and areas of common land. The project aims to better link people with wildlife-rich sites and promote opportunities and benefits which are low-impact and contribute to the local economy. The project will identify opportunities to include the development of walking routes, provision of new access infrastructure, better management of existing paths and targeted interpretation. The specific provision needed would be agreed through consultation with the public, local authority/AONB, landowners/managers and tourism providers.

Local LAND Project – Talley & Cwmdu

With a collaborative vision, the project aims to encompass in the region of 800 hectares of farmland in the historic villages of Talley and Cwmdu. At the heart of the project is the development and usage of 24 hectares of a diverse habitat of community owned land, located in the village of Talley. Residents and landowners have co-produced this project to address local challenges of social isolation, the lack of local business opportunities and the need for sustainable, resilient, land management practices and business. The project activities will focus on improving water retention in the uplands, improving water quality of the two Talley Lakes, development of wildflower meadows and diverse leys, tree planting and actively managed woodlands, improved access for people, better habitat connectivity and improving soil management. The community owned land will be developed to increase biodiversity and improve access for both residents and visitors to the area. The provision of infrastructure in this outdoor space will help create a more attractive place for people in the community to use supporting the opportunities to improve health and wellbeing, social cohesion, and a local sense of place.

Nant Alan land management and climate resilience project

The project aims to improve biodiversity and make the Nant Alan valley and its catchment more resilient. Downstream from the catchment the area suffers from flooding with consequences for homes & businesses, farmers, and their livestock. The project will focus on activities to help tackle diffuse pollution, reduce surface water flow, and restore broadleaved woodland. It will also create a forest school hub for community use, increase recreational opportunity, improve farm business resilience, and improve community engagement. Land management activities will include reedbed construction, the creation of new ponds, hedgerows, and new woodland planting, restoring of ancient woodland sites. The project will also carry out a school/community engagement programme and create a 'living laboratory' and network to discuss and plan the long-term sustainability of the valley.

WINDOW 5

Dawnsio ar y Dibyn

The Dawnsio ar y Dibyn project will establish an exemplar collaborative Pan Wales framework to enable a more strategic approach to effectively address the environmental and socio-economic issues impacting on Wales' coastal fringe ecosystems. The project will focus on developing links between existing projects, initiatives and working groups to minimise the duplication of effort, showcasing best practices that offer good value for money. It will increase engagement and participation and enable the undertaking of cooperative, adaptive approaches to sustainable coastal fringe management.

Prosiect Goedlan Glynllifon

This project will work with local communities to develop a collaborative approach to managing the natural resources of Glynllifon Country Park and surrounding area for the benefit of all. The project will focus on the sustainable long-term management of the woodland within the park and exploring connections with similar ecosystems in adjacent farmland. It will also explore the services this ecosystem can provide, and how we can bring people and nature together to provide social, economic, and health & wellbeing benefits. The woodland habitats (including a designated SAC & SSSI) are facing challenges due to storm damage, inadequate understanding of condition & management needs, and diminishing resources. This investment improves their qualities and potential allowing benefits to the local communities to be fully realised.

Bro Cors Caron

This farmer-led group aims to enhance the farmed landscape surrounding the northern end of Cors Caron National nature reserve. Holistically focusing on biodiversity, habitat enhancement, soil health and water quality and improving connectivity. Supporting the adjacent NNR and protecting natural resources and public goods alongside food production and profitable farming. Succession and providing opportunities for their children and future generations is a huge driver for the project. Alongside the habitat restoration the project aims to improve the well-being of the community, enhancing social connections, well-being and the traditional and historical connection between community and land.

Golygfa Gwydyr Wellbeing Project

The project aims to identify how Golygfa Gwydyr forest resources (under a 10-year Community Management Agreement (CMA) with Natural Resources Wales (NRW)) can be best utilised to deliver a range of wellbeing activities and to develop our forest resources for wellbeing activities to support beneficiaries across north Wales. Life in rural Conwy has traditionally been centred on farming and forestry and both remain important to local people. In the last two decades there has been a shift from these sectors to tourism but, culturally, farming and forestry remain important to the people and there remains much knowledge and skills in these areas which this project aims to preserve within the community.

Natural Solutions in the Elenydd Area of Ceredigion

A collaborative partnership between landowners, residents, Natural resources Wales and the Hafod Trust to support the resilience and sustainability of life in the Elenydd area of the Cambrian Uplands and Ystwyth Valley. The project celebrates the community heritage of the valley's historical mining past while minimising its negative environmental legacy on those living nearby and downstream to Cardigan Bay. The project hopes to bring together the community to engage and promote sustainable farming practices, better access to heritage and learning opportunities, more sustainable use of resources and access to volunteering in this iconic area preserving the intrinsic value of natural assets protecting language and community to benefit current and future generations.

People and Nature – Working Together

The Maesmawr Collaborative Group have identified local challenges facing farming and community life in the towns and villages of their landscape. Part of the River Severn upper catchment, incorporating some 17,240 acres of members' land and NRW forestry stretching from Dolfor in the east to Clywedog in the west. The main aim is to support the health of ecosystems to improve biodiversity. Our 30 farming partners will implement tree and hedge planting, restore habitats, improve connectivity, pond creation and developing better access to green and blue spaces for physical activity and mental well-being. They will also look to understand and promote better understanding of the threats and how to counter them by use of advanced technology. This will be done by being the first farmers in Wales to ground-truth satellite imagery as part of the Living Wales digital imaging project being run by Aberystwyth University.

Wales Resilient Ecological Network (WaREN 2)

The Wales Resilient Ecological Network (WaREN) project implements an exemplar collaborative pan Wales framework to facilitate more effective action to tackle INNS impacts on the environment, economy, and wellbeing of the people in Wales. The project aims to facilitate the formation of a sustainable network of Local Action Groups (LAGs) in Wales to enable delivery of effective actions on the ground on local INNS issues and in priority hot spots. They will produce and communicate project tools to support collaborative effective INNS actions including toolkits, training programme, surgeries, knowledge sharing forum and funding opportunities, to enable preventative measures to reduce INNS across Wales.

Cynefinoedd Cynaliadwy Amaethwyr Mawddwy

The group are made up of young landowners who farm extensively around Dinas Mawddwy in south Meirionnydd. Their livestock farms extend from the peaty uplands around Aran Fawddwy (905m), to the lush valleys of Cwm Cywarch and Llanymawddwy. In partnership with Snowdonia National Park Authority, the aim is to undertake a project to maximise the benefits that can come from the natural resources we have in the area, both for businesses and that of the wider community. The group aim to deliver a range of nature-based solutions across the farms to restore the uplands and manage them to increase resilience and improve biodiversity, store carbon, improve water quality & reduce flood risk. They will also look at the recreational benefits of the area, one of the most spectacular natural resources in this area is the Dark Skies Reserve status. This will sit alongside plans to improve access in the area, working in conjunction with other access-based projects. They aim to offer a host of training and community development opportunities and work alongside other partners to offer training and volunteer opportunities in the area to build capacity within their communities

Annex F: Discussion Guide – staff and stakeholders

Introduction

OB3, in association with the BRO Partnership has been commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake an evaluation of the Sustainable Management Scheme (SMS).

The aim of the evaluation is to evaluate the SMS, delivered as part of the Welsh Government Rural Communities – Rural Development Programme (RDP) in supporting collaborative action to improve natural resources, help achieve ecosystem resilience and contribute to sustaining the social and economic benefits for communities.

The evaluation has five key objectives to consider:

- the alignment of projects to the principles of SMNR
- the management and implementation of the scheme
- the nature and extent of collaboration and what this achieved
- the outcomes of the scheme and action on the policy priorities
- the contribution to the cross-cutting themes particularly climate adaptation and mitigation.

A key element of this study is to talk to people who have been involved in the SMS. As such, this final stage of the evaluation includes an opportunity to hear first-hand the views of projects and other key stakeholders.

The outcomes of these discussions and survey will be used to draft a report to Welsh Government which will include conclusions and recommendations to the future.

I'd expect our discussion to take no longer than an hour.

While we like to use quotes in our reports to back up key points, what you say will be in confidence and will not be attributed to you.

Would you like to undertake the interview in:

English? Cymraeg?

Interviews are usually conducted via Teams, if there is anything we can do to make the interview more accessible to you such as sending the questions in writing in advance or arranging for a different format, please let us know)

We would like permission to record the discussion, for research purposes only. No one outside of the research team will hear or see the notes of the recording. Are you happy for me to record our discussion? Yes No

A: Background

1. [if not previously interviewed] Tell me about:

- Your role
- Your organisation
- Your involvement with the SMS

B: Aims and Objectives of the SMS

2. What contribution has the SMS made to achieve the aims of its key policy drivers, particularly

- the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 and
- the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act? (Prompt: how has it supported the five ways of working ^[footnote 38] in particular?)

3. To what extent do you feel that the aims and objectives of the SMS have been met namely?

- to test an innovative, collaborative landscape-based funding mechanism, to inform future schemes
- to halt and address biodiversity decline across Wales
- to deliver a holistic, and flexible grant funding scheme which meets local needs
- to fund collaborative landscape-scale projects to improve natural resources in a way that delivers benefits to farm and rural businesses and rural communities

4. To what extent have projects aligned to the principles and ways of working of SMNR?

- To what extent has alignment to SMNR principles and ways of working enabled the SMS to achieve its aims?

5. If you were designing the SMS (or a similar future scheme) anew...

- what would you maintain/keep the same?
- what would you do differently?

Footnotes

[38] Long-term (balancing short-term needs with long-term needs), integration, involvement, collaboration, prevention

C: Management and Implementation of the scheme

6. What changes have there been (if any) to the management and monitoring of the SMS over the last year?
 - (If there were changes) Why were these changes made?
 - What have been the main strengths of the management of the SMS over the course of the scheme?
 - What could be improved?
7. What external impacts have helped or hindered the implementation of the scheme?
 - What uncertainties did projects face? (Prompt: Covid-19, supply chain issues, adverse weather etc)
 - What impact did any of these issues have on the scheme (e.g., uncommitted scheme funds, delays to projects, change in approach)
 - How were these dealt with?

D: Outputs, outcomes and difference made

8. To what extent has the SMS funded a diverse range of projects?
 - Are any sectors or geographical areas under-represented within the funded projects?
 - [If relevant] What could be done to widen the range of funded projects?
9. To what extent have SMS funded projects delivered against their KPIs?
 - What are the reasons for any strong or weak performance against project KPIs?
10. To what extent have SMS funded projects been led by a wide range of lead organisations and groups?
 - To what extent have project partnerships strengthened and broadened over the delivery period? What examples would you identify?
 - What added value, if any, has been secured from this collaborative approach?
 - What have been the biggest challenges in terms of project partnerships?
 - How likely are project partnerships and collaboration to be sustained post funding period in your opinion?
 - What examples of ongoing collaboration post funding are you aware of (if any)?
 - What examples are there of project partnerships securing other funding post SMS and/or becoming self-sustaining?

- What would help to sustain these partnerships for the long term in your opinion?

11. To what extent have SMS funded collaborative landscape-scale projects improved natural resources?

- What improvements to natural resources have been secured?
- How likely is it that these improvements will be maintained post funding in your opinion?
- What would help to sustain these improvements?

12. To what extent have SMS funded projects helped to improve Wales's biodiversity levels? (Probe re: connectivity between ecosystems; increase in size/scale of ecosystems; health/condition of ecosystems)

- What evidence is there of this?
- To what extent are these biodiversity level improvements likely to be sustained after funding?
- What would help to sustain these improvements?

13. To what extent has the SMS delivered a holistic and flexible grant funding scheme, which has met local needs?

- What social benefits to local communities have been achieved by the SMS?
- What economic benefits to local communities have been achieved by the SMS?
- What evidence is there?
- How likely are these impacts to be sustained post SMS funding in your opinion?
- What would help to sustain these impacts in the long term in your opinion?

E: Cross Cutting Themes

14. To what extent has the SMS scheme contributed to the Welsh Government's cross cutting themes (CCTs) of:

- Equality of Opportunity
- Sustainable Development
- Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion?

15. To what extent has the SMS scheme addressed the specific cross cutting objectives of the Rural Development Plan namely:

- Innovation

- Environment
- Climate change adaptation and mitigation?

16. To what extent has the SMS scheme contributed to the Welsh Government's Welsh language strategy, Cymraeg 2050?

F: Lessons Learned

17. To what extent has the SMS tested an innovative, collaborative, and landscape-based funding mechanism that will inform future funding schemes?

- What effective practice has been identified and evidenced?
- What practices have been ineffective?
- How will this inform future funding schemes?

18. To what extent has funding collaborative and landscape-based projects generated greater gains and outcomes than single farm-level and/or habitat/species level interventions in your opinion?

19. To what extent do you think the less prescriptive grant funding approach of the SMS will result in greater sustainability post funding in your opinion?

20. Is there anything else you would like to raise about the service, its design or operation that we did not cover?

Thank and close

Annex G: Discussion Guide – interviews with projects

A: Background

1. [if not previously interviewed] Tell me about:
 - your role in the partnership and your involvement with this SMS project
 - your project, the partner organisations involved, and how you came to work together.

B: Implementation of the SMS Project

2. To what extent do you feel that your project has delivered on what you set out to achieve? (add specific prompts relating the aims and objectives of the project being interviewed)?
 - How, if at all, have you adapted or changed your project over time and why?
 - What has worked well and why?
 - What didn't work so well and why?
3. How effective has the Welsh Government's management and monitoring of your SMS project been, particularly over the last year?
 - What are the key strengths of the relationship between WG and you as a project?
 - What, if anything could be improved?
4. What external factors or pressures affected the delivery of your project? (Prompt: e.g., COVID-19, supply chain issues, procurement issues)
 - To what extent (if at all) did your partnership adapt its delivery approach to mitigate against any of these external pressures?
 - (If relevant) To what extent did these external pressures affect your ability to achieve your outcomes?
5. If you were designing the SMS (or a similar future scheme) anew...
 - what would you maintain/keep the same?
 - what would you do differently?
6. In your opinion, what is needed to deliver an effective and efficient landscape-scale collaborative project?
 - What would you maintain/do the same?
 - What would you do differently?

C: Nature and extent of collaboration

7. What is the extent and nature of the collaboration within your project?

- How involved are the partners? (i.e., what is the scale and scope of the collaboration and involvement in decision making)
- How did the roles and responsibilities of partners develop over time?
- How, if at all, did the project partnership strengthen or broaden over the delivery period in your opinion?
- What is working well/what are the benefits of collaborative working?
- What are the challenges?
- What added value is being secured from this collaboration?

8. How sustainable is your project partnership post SMS funding?

- How, if at all, does this differ from what was expected at the outset (i.e., as set out in the application form)?
- What examples do you have (if any) of additional or ongoing collaboration taking place within your partnership?
- What examples do you have (if any) of your project partnership securing other funding post SMS and/or becoming self-sustaining?
- What additional support would help sustain the partnerships for the long term in your opinion? (Prompt: e.g., support services, advisory services, peer-to-peer networks etc)

D: Achievements and Impacts

9. To what extent have you delivered against your project's KPIs? (Prompt for over- and under- delivery against KPIs)

- What has enabled you to achieve your KPIs?
- What have been the challenges and barriers to achieving any of your KPIs?
- What unexpected achievements (if any) did you accomplish? Why was that?

10. To what extent does your project monitoring and final evaluation capture and reflect on the achievements and impacts that your project has achieved?

- [If monitoring/evaluation does not reflect] What monitoring and evaluation data should be collected in future to capture these impacts?

11. What contribution and difference has your SMS project made to biodiversity?

- To what extent is your ecosystem now more resilient? (Probe re: diversity, connectivity, scale, condition, adaptability of ecosystem)
- To what extent did your actions help to prevent significant damage to ecosystems?
- What evidence do you have of this impact?
- To what extent is the difference made to biodiversity likely to be sustained after funding?
- How do you intend to manage and maintain what has been achieved?

12. To what extent did working collaboratively on a landscape scale, enable you to improve biodiversity?

- To what extent have these nature-based interventions been delivered on the right scale?
- To what extent has working on a landscape-scale had a greater impact than on a farm-by-farm basis (if at all)?

13. To what extent has your SMS project helped to address local challenges in your opinion? (Note to interviewer: identify the local needs and challenges outlined in initial application)

- What contribution and difference has your project made to the local community? (Prompt: e.g., local community making greater use of outdoor spaces or assets, health and wellbeing benefits, volunteering)
- What contribution and difference has your project made to the local economy? (Prompt: e.g., farm diversification, commercial opportunities for local businesses etc)
- What evidence do you have of the difference made?
- To what extent have members of the local community participated in decision making to achieve these?
- How likely are these to be sustained post SMS funding in your opinion?
- What would help to sustain the contribution and the difference made in the long term in your opinion?

14. How likely would these contributions and difference made to the environment, economy and/or community been achieved without SMS funding?

- Why do you say that?

E. Cross Cutting Themes and objectives

15. How has your project contributed to the Welsh Government's cross cutting themes (CCTs)?

- How has your project achieved Equality of Opportunity (Prompt: for example, gender or ethnic minority make-up of employees or volunteers)?
- How has your project ensured Sustainable Development ^[footnote 39]?
- How has your project helped tackle poverty and social exclusion?
- What innovation did your project demonstrate or deliver?
- What examples do you have of this?
- What adaptations did your project make (if at all) to minimise your project's impact on the climate? (Probe for infrastructure changes e.g., building flood defences, or behaviour changes e.g., reducing waste or water use, preventing wildfires)
- How (if at all) did your project mitigate against climate change (i.e., prevent or reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases)? (Probe for use of renewable energy, tree planting, increase size of forest)
- What examples do you have of this?

16. How has your project contributed to the Welsh Government's Welsh language strategy, Cymraeg 2050?

F. Lessons Learned

17. What lessons have been learned from your project's approach to collaborative landscape-scale management (if any)?

- What has enabled you to succeed or be sustainable?
- What have been the barriers to underachievement?

18. What lessons learned from the SMS should be considered in any future, collaborative funding mechanisms, in your opinion?

19. Is there anything else you would like to raise about the service, its design or operation that we did not cover?

Thank and close

Footnotes

[39] Sustainable development is an organising principle for meeting human development goals while also sustaining the ability of natural systems to provide the natural resources and ecosystem services on which the economy and society depend

Annex H: Case Study template

PROJECT NAME:	
OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT:	<p><i>Include a brief description of the project here including:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>amount of funding received</i> <i>details of lead and key partners and</i> <i>the location and spatial scale for delivery of the project.</i>
EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENTS / OUTCOMES	
<p><i>Guidance:</i> Please report against the relevant SMNR principles below. Try to choose at least 4-5 of the SMNR principles and report on the evidence available from interviews (including quotes) and project progress / end reports on how the project has delivered against these. Wherever possible try to choose a couple of 'process' related principles from the left-hand column and a couple of 'outcome' related principles from the right hand column.</p>	
ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT (SMNR Principle 1)	EVIDENCE (SMNR Principle 5)
<p><i>How has the project changed its actions when required? What impact did this have? What external factors impacted upon it and how did it respond? What evidence is there that the project was flexible and adaptable? How did this make it more efficient or effective? How did this increase innovation within the project?</i></p>	<p><i>Has it delivered against KPIs? Where has it over delivered and why? Has the project been successful in capturing evidence of outputs and outcomes? How did it achieve this? What worked well?</i></p>
SCALE (SMNR Principle 2)	MULTIPLE BENEFITS (SMNR Principle 6)
<p><i>What evidence is there that the spatial scale of the action (i.e., working on a landscape scale) has delivered greater outcomes?</i></p>	<p><i>What social, economic, or other unexpected outcomes, benefits, impacts has the project achieved? E.g.</i> <i>Social – reduced crime, improved community cohesion, improved culture/heritage, improved health & wellbeing, increased</i> <i>Economic – increased direct spending in local economy, appointing local contractors, increased rural skills development, securing other sources of funding (e.g. from private sector, PES), increased visitor numbers, diversification or commercial opportunities, development of green infrastructure</i></p>
COLLABORATION AND ENGAGEMENT (SMNR Principle 3)	LONG TERM (SMNR Principle 7)
<p><i>How has the project promoted and engaged in collaboration and cooperation? How has this impacted upon the outcomes?</i></p>	<p><i>How has the project considered the medium and longer term impact that it can achieve? Has it secured any additional funding from</i></p>

<p><i>What evidence is there that the project has:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>developed new collaborations</i> • <i>broadened or strengthened existing partnership</i> • <i>strengthen governance arrangements</i> • <i>provide access to a larger delivery team</i> • <i>strengthened alignment to common goals</i> • <i>transferred knowledge between partners</i> 	<p><i>WG./other sources? How will the project become self-sustaining in part or fully?</i></p>
<p>PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SMNR Principle 4)</p>	<p>PREVENTATIVE ACTION (SMNR Principle 8)</p>
<p><i>How has the project engaged with the public, particularly in decision-making? How has it allowed for better engagement with the local community? What evidence is there of increased community led local development? What evidence of increased volunteering or educational opportunities? What evidence of increased opportunities for local people to connect with nature? What impact has this had?</i></p>	<p><i>What evidence is there that the project has taken action to prevent damage to ecosystems?</i></p> <p><i>What evidence is there of:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Reduced flood risk</i> • <i>Improved soil quality</i> • <i>Improved air/water quality</i> • <i>Reduced pollution</i> • <i>Improved protection from invasive species</i> • <i>Increased biodiversity</i> • <i>Increased habitat restoration</i> • <i>Improved management of coastal zone</i> • <i>Improved woodland management</i> • <i>Increased tree planting</i>
	<p>BUILDING RESILIENCE (SMNR Principle 9)</p> <p><i>What evidence is there that the project has created a more resilient ecosystem? E.g., improved diversity, connections between, scale, condition, or adaptability of ecosystems? What evidence is there that the outcomes described under Principle 8 above will be sustained?</i></p>
<p>Concluding Remarks</p>	

Annex I: SMS Online survey

SMS FINAL EVALUATION

ONLINE SURVEY OF FUNDED PROJECTS

OB3 Research is conducting a long-term evaluation of the Sustainable Management Scheme (SMS) on behalf of the Welsh Government.

As part of this final stage of the evaluation we wish to gather feedback from funded projects about the benefits, impacts and difference made by your project.

We kindly ask that you complete this brief questionnaire to tell us about the outcomes and impacts of your project. The survey should take no more than 15 minutes to complete.

More information about the evaluation, including a Privacy Notice setting out how we will use your feedback, is available [here](#)

A hoffech lenwi'r holiadur yma yn:

Would you like to complete this questionnaire in:

- English
- y Gymraeg

Background

- A1. Please provide the name of your SMS project (This is so that we can monitor the responses received for the survey. Your responses will be analysed anonymously)**

Name of SMS project _____

- A2. Are you a:**

- Lead applicant organisation
- Delivery partner
- Project delivery team member
- Other

Please specify:

- A3. [If A2=1] Which of the following best describes the current circumstances of your project?**

- Your SMS funded project remains underway
- Your SMS funded project is close to completion
- Your SMS funded project is complete
- Other

Please specify: _____

Collaboration

B1. [If A2=1] What type of organisations did your project partner with (tick all that apply)

- Non-government organisation
- Third sector (e.g. charity, community group, trust)
- National Park Authority / Area of Outstanding National Beauty
- Local Authority
- Health Board
- Police authority or Fire and Rescue service
- Other

Please specify: _____

B2. [If A2=1] Did the SMS funding received by your project support...

- The development of a new collaboration to deliver your SMS project
- An existing collaboration to deliver your SMS project
- The development of new collaborations in addition to supporting existing ones
- Did not support any new or existing collaboration
- Don't know

B3. Which of the following positive impacts, if any, did working collaboratively in partnership have for your project? [Select all that apply]

- Strengthened governance arrangements
- Provided access to a larger delivery team
- Strengthened alignment to common goals
- Allowed for better engagement with the local community
- Allowed for actions at landscape scale to be delivered more effectively
- Allowed the project to be more flexible and adaptable?
- Enabled more efficient delivery of activities
- Increased innovation and transfer of knowledge between partners
- None of the above
- Other

Please specify: _____

B4. Which of the following negative impacts, if any, did working collaboratively in partnership have for your project? [Select all that apply]

- Increased the amount of administration work
- Made it more difficult to make decisions
- Slowed down the pace of delivery
- Made it more challenging to engage with the local community
- Hindered innovation and transfer of knowledge between partners
- Made it more difficult to be flexible and adaptable
- Made delivery of activities less efficient
- None of the above
- Other

Please specify: _____

B5. How likely is it that project partners will continue to collaborate in the future (post SMS funding) in your opinion?

- Very likely
- Moderately likely
- Not very likely
- Not at all likely
- Don't know/Not sure

Project outputs and outcomes

C1. [If A2=1] To what extent are you likely to achieve (or have achieved) your KPIs for your SMS project?

- Achieve or exceed all KPIs
- Achieve almost all KPIs
- Partially achieve KPIs
- Unlikely to achieve most KPIs
- Unlikely to achieve any KPIs

What contribution (if any) has your SMS project made to the following environmental outcomes?

C2.	<i>Major contribution</i>	<i>Some contribution</i>	<i>No contribution</i>	<i>Not relevant</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
	<i>on</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>to our project</i>	
Reduced flood risk	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Improved soil health/soil quality management	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Improved air quality	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Improved water quality	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increased biodiversity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increased peatland restoration	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increased habitat restoration	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Improved management of coastal zone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reduced agricultural pollution	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Improved woodland management	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increased tree planting	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Improved protection from invasive species	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please specify) _____

C3. [Where C2=1,2] To what extent will these environmental outcomes be sustained post SMS funding in your opinion?

	<i>Fully sustained</i>	<i>Sustained to some extent</i>	<i>Not likely to be sustained</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
e.g. Improved air quality	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e.g. Restored habitats	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e.g. Decreased agricultural pollution	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

C4. How has your SMS project created a more resilient ecosystem? (Tick all that apply)

- Improved connectivity between ecosystem
Increased diversity between and within ecosystems
- Increased scale or size of ecosystem
- Improved health and condition of ecosystem
Improved adaptability of ecosystems
- Other (please specify) _____

C5. What social benefits (if any), has your SMS project contributed to the local community?

	<i>Major contribution</i>	<i>Some contribution</i>	<i>No contribution</i>	<i>Not relevant to our project</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
Reduced rural crime and anti-social behaviour	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Improved community cohesion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Improved rural culture and heritage	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increased community led local development	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Improved health and wellbeing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increased access to the outdoors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increased volunteering opportunities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increased educational opportunities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increased opportunities for local people to connect with nature	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please specify) _____					

C6. [Where C5=1,2] To what extent will these social benefits to local communities be sustained post SMS funding in your opinion?

	<i>Fully sustained</i>	<i>Sustained to some extent</i>	<i>Not likely to be sustained</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
e.g. Improved health and wellbeing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e.g. Improved community cohesion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e.g. Improved rural culture and heritage	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

C7. What economic benefits (if any) has your SMS project contributed to the local area?

	<i>Major contribution</i> <i>n</i>	<i>Some contribution</i> <i>n</i>	<i>No contribution</i> <i>n</i>	<i>Not relevant to our project</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
Increased direct spending in local economy e.g., appointing local contractors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increased rural skills development/capacity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increased knowledge transfer or innovation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Secured other sources of funding (e.g. private sector) to the area	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increased visitor numbers to the local area	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Created new diversification opportunities for farmers or other partners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Created new commercial opportunities/jobs in the area	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Developed green infrastructure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please specify) _____					

C8. [If C7f=1,2] What type of diversification opportunities were created as a result of SMS funding?

- Diversified into tourism sector
- Diversified into other agricultural areas
- Other [please specify]

C9. [If C7=1,2] To what extent will these economic benefits to the local area be sustained post SMS funding in your opinion?

	<i>Fully sustained</i>	<i>Sustained to some extent</i>	<i>Not likely to be sustained</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
e.g. Increased rural skills development/capacity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e.g. Increased in visitor numbers to local area	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e.g. Developed green infrastructure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**C10. What would help you to sustain these environmental, social, and economic outcomes, post SMS funding?
Please rank in order of usefulness where 1=most useful and 5=least useful]**

- Financial support from Welsh Government
- Advisory support from Welsh Government
- Support networks with similar projects
- Support networks with projects in the same region
- Additional training and learning

Other [Please specify] _____

Cross cutting themes and objectives

D1. [If A2=1] How much contribution has your project made to the three cross-cutting themes and objectives of:

	<i>Major contribution</i>	<i>Some contribution</i>	<i>No contribution at all</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
Equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sustainable development	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tackling poverty and social exclusion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Environment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Innovation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Climate change adaptation and mitigation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

D2. [If D1=1,2] Please provide examples of how your project has contributed to the cross-cutting theme(s) and objectives?

D3. [If A2=1] How much contribution has your project made to the Welsh Government's Welsh language strategy, Cymraeg 2050?

- Major contribution
- Some contribution
- No contribution at all
- Don't know

D4. [If D3=1,2] Please provide examples of how your project has contributed to the Welsh language strategy?

Sustainability of your project

E1. [If A2=1] Has the SMS funding enabled your project partnership to secure any additional or other funding? [Select all that apply]

- Yes, other Welsh government funding sources have been secured
- Yes, other non-government sources have been secured
- We are currently awaiting the outcome of a funding bid
- Not yet, but other sources of funding will be sought
- Activities will be self-sustaining (in part or full)
- There is no intention to continue with the project partnership/seek funding
- Don't know

E2. [If E1=1,2,3, 4] What other sources of funding have been (or will be) applied for?

E3. What lessons from the SMS should be considered in any future collaborative funding mechanisms?

E4. Finally, do you have any other comments to make about the SMS?
